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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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OF THINGS BEYOND

Unknown, becomes Unknown Worlds in larger edition this issue, perhaps needs some introduction to new readers, perhaps a sort of rededication to its old friends.

In handling material as delicate as fantasy must be, no formula is possible, no standardization on methods of presentation, handling or type of material can be allowed. But a basic philosophy as to what constitutes fantasy, and what makes for the modern type Unknown Worlds intends to present is both possible and necessary.

It seems to us that inasmuch as fantasy is no more than a specialized form of literature in general, the first essential is that ascribed to general fiction—to hold a mirror up to life. But fantasy's sole function is entertainment; neither instruction nor "great truths of life" belong in the field. Hence the mirror of life that fantasy presents should be an amusingly—and sometimes chillingly—distorting mirror. For comedy, the distortion shall be of the Coney Island amusement park order, bulbous and twisted out of any semblance of reality to a point where the onlooker can laugh with a hearty "Thank the Lord, I don't look like *that!*"

The essence of fantasy horror—the most effective, lingering kind—is much the same. Again the distorting mirror, but now the distortion is skillfully controlled, a slight twisting of things normal that gives them a queer, malign aspect. The color of the glass is just a bit wrong, the illumination thrown on it is subtly discolored so that faces reflected in it appear sallow and bluish, corpselike. The features reflected are clearly identifiable; they are close enough to exact truth to give pause, to make the distortion seem rather a sudden realization of the hitherto hidden true aspect of things.

Hardest of all types to write, that variety of horror fantasy can be delightfully chilling. It sticks with one. That feeling of "Thank the Lord I don't look like that—do I?" remains to highten the drama of little daily things.

The best examples of that type of work are, perhaps, "Fear," by L. Ron Hubbard; "None But Lucifer," by L. Sprague de Camp and H. L. Gold; and Hubbard's "Death's Deputy." Have you noticed, by the way, with what unpleasant precision the world followed the outlined plans of "Alexander P. Johnson"—Lucifer—as foretold in "None But Lucifer"?

The second type of horror-fantasy involves nonhuman beings and unreal situations as prime movers. "Dracula" of course is the classic example; Theodore Sturgeon's "It" was a very neat modern example. The classic ghost story type Unknown Worlds rather tends to ignore—because it has been too thoroughly formulized. Ghosts, vampires, werewolves—all the stock characters of stock fantasy horror, have been so long cast in a stereotyped mold as to paralyze them. Unknown Worlds is trying to develop a more modern mythology. If we do discuss werewolves, why let it be the troubles of a werewolf beset by an overzealous and highly efficient local dogcatcher laboring under a misapprehension as to his identity. If it's vampires you want—tradition doesn't explain what happens to a vampire subjected to X-ray bombardment, or treated to a dose of mustard gas (which has a garlicliike odor!).

But mythology has, in the past, been a serious business, developed by priests and chieftains to scare their reluctant followers into good behavior. Humor had little place there. Folklore tended toward two types; mothers and nursemaids developed the "Goblins'll gitcha if—you—don't—watch—out!" technique for purposes very similar to the more formal mythology. And the folklore of fairies, leprechauns and the like, a light, amusing folklore, was intended to amuse other adults—and, incidentally, any children handy.

There was very little amusing fantasy in the past; most of it was designed to scare the brats into the quivering shakes instead of having them bawl half the night. We'll forget that tradition along with the Old English Ghost Story, that began "Had I known what horror I was to meet that dread and dreary night, never would I have set forth into the rain-lashed darkness."

We'll try a little laughter—for fantasy lends itself ideally to pricking the pompous dignity of this crazy world.

And we'll also try a bit of the slight-distortion type, too. Next issue, in fact. Cleve Cartmill has a feature novel called "Bit of Tapestry," a novel of a small town, of a garage attendant—and three old maid sisters who help him out a little in his trouble. They're a curious trio, two blind, and the third with but one good eye, two deaf—and, because they look much alike, seem to delight in changing names or something. The one who can see may be Emily, or Margaret today, and say she's sister Gertrude when you meet her tomorrow. They all three go in for offhand, and fatally accurate, prophecies.

And there's the man who goes around distributing legacies and giving good jobs—for a plausible seeming reason. Nice bit of work, we thought. The three sisters make interesting characters— THE EDITOR.

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THE LAND OF UNREASON

By L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt

● **The Little Folk always were naive, and when one sent to collect a Changeling mistook a bowl of high-proof Scotch for a bowl of milk—**

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

THE moon broke free. As the torn clouds trailed out in wisps and streaks, it seemed to rock among them with a boatlike motion, rising over the Pennine moors. Small wonder, thought Fred Barber, that peoples as far apart as Assyria and Hawaii made it the celestial ship of their mythology.

Beside him, Mr. Gurton grunted, spat into a warm night rendolent of broom and dog rose, and reached across to knock his pipe against the doorpost. The few last live sparks in the heel traced an intricate pattern of red down the dark.

"Time were," remarked Mr. Gurton, "when I'd have

said that looked beautiful. Nah all a man can think of is t' damned jerries on our necks befoor moornin'."

As though to furnish a comment on the relative unimportance of jerries in a world that held higher things, a voice called from within: "Sooper's ready."

Barber crushed out his cigarette and took two steps toward the door. As he turned, the tail of his eye caught in the moonlit landscape a flicker of something that did not belong. He froze, at gaze. It was there, all right—a jagged row of crimson flashes climbing up the sky from some point below the horizon. Barber caught his breath.

"Leeds is catchin' it," said Mr. Gurton's low-pitched, evenly stressed voice. They stood watching for a moment till the dull *boom, boom, beroom* drifted to them along the avenue of sound made by the valley of the Aire. Then Gurton, as though the noise had released him from a spell, flung the door open.

It snapped to behind them. With an extra tug to insure its tightness, Gurton led the way down a passage illuminated only by an overflow of light from the living room. He jerked his thumb at a curtained door as they passed it. "Bloody fine world to bring a nipper oop in," said he.

Mrs. Gurton accosted them at the entrance to the living room, a thin-faced woman with hair pulled tight back and nervous hands. *"Ssh,* Jock," she said, "don't you know it's St. John's Eve? They say 'twill bring t' child bad loock all his life long to talk so abaht him tonight." She managed a smile in Barber's direction, but there was a hint of earnestness in the voice and the movement with which she caught her apron.

Gurton smiled slowly. "Nah, lass," he said, with the patience of a man going over the gambits of a long-familiar argument, "that's nowt boot superstition. What would t' vicar say?" He sighed. "Maybe t' flashes we saw were nowt but fairy fires."

Boom. Boomity. Boom.

"That were Bradford," remarked Mr. Gurton.

Oh, hell, why couldn't the war let him alone? Why couldn't he let the war alone? They would be at it again, half the night.

He wished he had gone on to Scotland as he had planned, instead of letting young Leach talk him into finishing his convalescence in a Yorkshire cottage. "I know just the place for you." Damn young Leach for a plausible, well-intentioned ass! It was the plausible, well-intentioned people that made the real trouble in the world, not the malicious ones. If Chamberlain had not been—

Mr. Gurton set his knife against his plate with a small clink and looked at the clock. It read 10:45.

BOOM!

The dishes rattled slightly. The savory was a slice of toast upon which reposed a small and very dead sardine. Mrs. Gurton said: "I kept your toast 'ot special, Mr. Barber."

"Thanks ever so much," said Barber. It was lukewarm. Mr. Gurton picked up his sardine with a long, knobby machine-oil-blackened hand. It vanished, and his own decently frigid toast after it.

LUKEWARM, thought Barber. His mind was divided into two parts. One part ran desperately around a great black hole that was the War and all the things that came up out of it and went down into it. Lukewarm, said the other part. He tried to distract himself with the question of why Luke should be less warm than the other evangelists. Why not Matthew-warm, Mark-warm, John-warm? Why the evangelists, for that matter? Why not Adolf-warm, which would be hell-hot?

Boomboom.

Mr. Gurton rose and put on a cloth cap, with a creased and sagging peak that shadowed all of his cadaverous face except his long chin. He said: "You'll not worry, Mr. Barber. Unless they coom ower this way to bomb Keighley, all's well 'ere. Good-neet." His brisk tread hardly showed the limp as he went to get his bicycle and pedal off to work.

Mrs. Gurton looked after him calmly. The door banged. All at once a stream of talk burst from her lips, as though the sound had released a spring that held her tongue prisoner. The war, the war, Barber's mind kept saying to him from the background, his ears only partly registering this monotonous flow of sound.

"—ma aunt's yoong man. I remember 'e were 'urt i' t' gurt war, joost t' way Jock were, only it were a shell and noot a airplane bomb that fell i' t' trench joost when they were 'avin' breekfast and 'e were eatin' ploom-and-apple, and always after that when'ver 'e 'eerd a sharp sound like a mauter-car backfirin' it made him retch, and 'e did say it were all because he saw a black cat—"

Taptap.

Mrs. Gurton was opening the door. The lamplight fell dimly on a small boy with the plucked look English small boys have, and a bicycle, and an anxious, excited face.

He should be calmed with light conversation. "Calm them with light conversation before undertaking the diplomatic approach," Barber's old chief in the State Department had told him before letting him go out on his first mission, the vice-consulship at Seville.

The boy was talking in a high voice: "Please moom, a gurt bomb 'it near t' Winstanley's 'oose, and Mrs. Winstanley's 'urt soomat nasty and Dr. Thawley says please would you coom—"

"Wait a bit," said Mrs. Gurton. Barber saw the eyes regard him sharply over her shoulder as she picked up her shawl.

He stood up a little too quickly; his head began to throb. He said: "Can't I—"

"Nah, Mr. Barber, remember what t' doctor telled you; s'ouldn't strain yoursen. You go off to bed like a good lad." She was out of the door before he had a chance to argue—the back door, on some errand, then in again, through the house and out the front door into the warm night, where things went *boomboom.*

BARBER slumped back into the uncomfortable chair, his legs spreading to find an easier angle. His head ached. It was not that one feared death after having the possibility so long as a familiar companion. It was this living on and waiting to drop dead after being clipped on the head by a bomb-splinter or piece of shrapnel—he had never learned which—as you ran out of the Embassy into the night when the German raiders came. British or German? German or British? Somebody had thrown into that night a missile that struck a neutral American in a quarrel that was none of his. Diplomatic immunity did not, he reflected, exist in the material world. It was a purely spiritual quality, and he was feeling sorry for himself, which—

Boom. Boom.

Oh, for Heaven's sake! Why couldn't they let up? Why couldn't anybody let up? If he had been more sure of Kaja, of where she might be spending that night when the bombers came, he wouldn't have run out of the Embassy. If he could be more sure of Kaja now, he wouldn't be miserable. He allowed his mind to dwell on Kaja, pleasant thought; her red hair and long silky legs, and the fact that although she had a straight nose and Hungarian name and claimed to be from Budapest, she was unquestionably Jewish.

Kaja, pleasant thought, always looking light enough to fly. The fragment of a song occurred to him—"I wonder who's kissing her now"—and he smiled wryly. Anybody who could buy her enough Scotch. Kaja preferred Scotch to champagne. It was a good drink, Scotch. Useful when a man couldn't sleep.

He got up, more slowly this time, and dug his bottle of Scotch out, pouring himself a hefty dram. He swashed it around in the glass, staring at the pale orange liquid. He lifted the glass.

Beroom.

And set it down again. With a trick of automatic memory his mind had jerked back to the picture of Mrs. Gurton going out the back door. She had had something in her hand, a bowl, a bowl of—milk. Milk? The Gurtons did keep a cat. Why milk to the back door?

Fred Barber remembered that Mrs. Gurton had said this was St. John's Eve, the twenty-third of June, the day before Midsummer Day. Oh, yes, something in "The Golden Bough." You leave milk out for the Little People that night, especially if there is a baby in the house, for unless the Little People receive their tribute, they are likely to steal the child and leave a changeling. Interesting survival; who would have believed that a woman whose husband ran a drill press in a munitions factory and who herself went to nurse a neighbor through a bomb wound, would leave milk at the door for fairies? Almost worth writing a sardonic little note about, to be sent to *The New Yorker* which would return him a check no doubt, to be spent on Scotch for Kaja.

Milk.

Fred Barber liked milk, a fact which he concealed with care from the crowd in London. He had been brought up on a drink of milk before bedtime. It made him sleep. But the war and milk-rationing had made him go without, like many others to whom milk was more of a hobby than a necessity. Mrs. Gurton could have it for the baby, of course. But if she were going to give it to the fairies, why, Fred Barber argued to himself with a grin, he was as good a fairy as any who would be abroad that night. The mission of fairies was to bring gifts, and he was bringing the Gurtons a pound sterling a week.

Milk. The mere idea of drinking it instead of the Scotch gave him a sense of virtue and power. His mind flashed back to the determination with which he had set out on his career. If he could recover some of that, the old pep, a little crack on the head wouldn't matter. He could demonstrate a capacity for hardness to himself, recall the sense of destiny that had filled him once. To hell with the Scotch, and Kaja, too. He strode to the door, his mind so intent on the peculiar nobility of using milk instead of Scotch as a sleeping powder that he carried the glass with him.

THE MOONLIGHT showed the bowl, sure enough, a pale circle beside one of the flowerpots that lined the back of the cottage. Barber stuck his finger in the bowl and tasted. It was milk—trust Mrs. Gurton. He set down the glass, and as the bombs in the distance continued their infernal beat, lifted the bowl in both hands, drinking slowly and with relish.

Over the edge of the vessel he could see the red glow of something burning in Bradford, with searchlight beams flickering cobwebby above. And what would the fairies of St. John's Eve do now, poor things, with no milk and bombs falling on their heads? Fred Barber set the bowl down, and then grinned like a small boy in the dark as inspiration came to him. They could drink Scotch!

He poured the slug of Scotch into the bowl, watching the last dregs of the milk weave through it. He chuckled at the thought of Mrs. Gurton's expression when she found the milk of which she had robbed the baby so mysteriously transmuted. The sense of languor that presaged instant slumber was still wanting, as it had been ever since his injury. But he knew now it would come. He was at peace.

Even the little night light which had been necessary since his injury failed to exercise its customary irritating effect. Instead, Barber stretched luxuriously, reaching his arms above his head. His hand encountered a book, hanging there in the little over-bed shelf, and the idea of reading himself to sleep occurred. What was the book?

He examined it under the night light. A worn copy of old "Chatterbox," belonging obviously to the elder of the Gurton children, now a registered boy aboard one of his majesty's trawlers, bouncing around somewhere in the cold Atlantic. Well, "Chatterbox" would do as well as a detective story to throw one's mind out of gear for purposes of slumber. He opened the book

at random, and began reading at the top of a page, midway of some G. A. Henty-ish tale of the Crusades:

—in haste to reach his son at the other side of the river, would not wait till the bridge was clear, but plunged his horse into the water and tried to swim across. But Frederick was weighted down with armor and the stream was deeper than he thought. Horse and men were carried away, and it is supposed they were drowned.

But his body was never found, and in Germany it is believed he never died. They say that Frederick Barbarossa, the great red-bearded king, is in his castle of the Wartburg. He sits at the head of his council table, asleep, and has been there so long that his beard has grown through the table. Ravens fly round the castle. Once in a hundred years Frederick sends a page to see whether the world needs him, and when he finds it does not—

Barber let the book slip from his hands, thinking how odd it was that the boy who had read this legend of Germany should now be fighting Germans. But that was a different kind of Germans, a noble king who went on a crusade against just the kind of force the modern Germany represented—and his mind drifted off into a hazy picture of fairies, Crusaders, Kaja and the Gurtons.

Tik.

The door hinge, faintly, as though someone had moved the door through a few minutes of arc. Then again—*tik—tik—tik, tik-tik-tiktiktik, creeeeak—*

Barber, fully awake now, looked toward the door. It was open, and something coming through it. He couldn't be sure in the gloom, but it looked like a face, an incredible face that might have come from a comic strip. The loose lips were drawn back in a grin so extended that the corners of the mouth were out of sight. For all Barber could tell, the grin went all the way 'round and met in back, like Humpty-dumpty's. The ears were pendulous; over the grin was a hairless head bearing a pair of knobbed antennae.

Oh, well, *that,* said Fred Barber to himself. With that strange double vision, outside and inside of one's personality, that comes at the edge of sleep, he felt certain he was dreaming and slipped down into the blank again.

II.

He was lying on his side, one arm curled under his head and blue moonlight all around him. If—

He became aware that the fingers of the hand underneath were touching grass. He heaved himself to a sitting posture, now bolt wide awake. From beyond his own feet the face of the dream was grinning under knobbed antennae, which pricked eagerly toward him like the horns of a snail. Behind, Barber was conscious of other crowding figures as he tried to concentrate on what knobhorns was saying.

"—mickle bit o' work, moom." Knobhorns spread his arms and let the hands dangle from a pair of loose wrists, swaying slightly like a tightrope walker. "'E were that 'eavy. *'Ic.*"

There was a little ripple of suppressed amusement behind Barber, with a clear contralto voice rising out of it:

"Wittold! Is't so you were taught to address the queen's majesty? What said you?"

The mobile features regrouped themselves from a grin into an expression of comic and formidable sullenness.

"I said 'e were 'eavy."

"Aye. One needs not your ass' ears to have caught so much. But after that?"

Barber swiveled. The contralto belonged to a beauty built on the ample lines of the members of a showgirl chorus he had once seen, justifiably advertised as the "Ten Titanic Swede-hearts." He caught a glimpse of patrician nose, masterful chin, and dark hair on which rode a diadem with a glowing crescent in front.

The being with the antennae replied: "I said nowt after that. *'Ic.*"

Barber experienced an odd sensation; some sixth sense informed him that the individual was not quite sure of his own veracity. The tall lady had no such doubts:

"Ah, 'tis time for a shaping, indeed," she cried, "when my husband makes messengers of louts that lie bare-faced! What is't, I asked, some new form of address in mock compliment from my gentle lord? You said *Ic!*"

Antennae shifted his feet, opened his mouth, and abruptly fell down. The others clustered around him, twittering, babbling, and pushing, a singular crowd.

Some were as tall as he was and some small, down to a foot in height, and their appearance was as various as their size. Many, especially of the smaller ones, had wings growing out of their backs; some were squat and broad, as though a gigantic hand had pushed them groundward while they were in a semifluid state. An individual with a beard and wall eyes that gave him an expression of perpetual surprise was dressed like a Palmer Cox brownie; others wore elaborate clothes that might have been thought up by King Richard II, and some had no more clothes than a billiard ball.

Pink elephants, thought Barber, or am I going nuts? One half of his mind was rather surprised to find the other half considering the question with complete detachment.

"What ails yon wight?" demanded the regal lady, who had not condescended to join the crowd.

The brownie looked around. "A sleeps; plain insensible like a stockfish, and snoring." There was a chatter of other voices: "An enchantment, for sure—Send for Dos Erigu— The leprechauns again, they followed the king— Nay, that's no prank, 'tis sheer black kobbold malice—"

"Peace!" The contralto cut sharply across the other voices, and she extended her arm. Barber saw that she held a slender rod about a foot long, with a point of light at its tip. "If there's sorcery here, we'll soon have it unsorcelled. Azam-mancestu-monejalma—sto!" The point of light leaped from the tip of the road, moving through the air with a sinuous, flowing motion. It lit on the forehead of the antennaed one, where it spread across his features till they seemed to glow from within. He grunted and turned over, a fatuous smile spreading

across his face, but did not wake. The tall lady let arm and rod fall.

"Pah!" said she. "Like a stockfish, you put it? Say a stock rather; here's no enchantment but a booby with barely wit enough to live. Oh, I'm well served." She gazed down at Barber, with an expression of scorn on her delicately cut features. "And here he's brought this great oafish ill-favored creature, beyond doubt the least attractive changeling of the current reign."

Barber was being scrutinized. "Think you His Radiance will accept the thing?" inquired one, doubtfully.

The tall lady sighed. "We can but try. Mayhap 'twill find him in his mad humor and so suit. See to the object; we return within an hour." She swept off into a little grove of trees through which the pillars of some structure gleamed whitely.

The one who had spoken last, a winged female about four feet high, bent over Barber, examining his pajamas. "He has arrived without his clout," she said. "Have we one?"

A square of whitish cloth was passed from hand to hand. The four-footer folded it diagonally and tried to roll Barber over.

"Hey!" he protested. "What's the idea?"

"The changeling speaks," said one of them in an astonished tone. "Faith, and well," replied another admiringly, "what precocity! His Radiance will after all be pleased." And half a dozen of them went off into peals of gay, tinkling laughter. Barber could see neither rhyme nor reason to it, but he was not granted the opportunity, as at the same moment he was seized by a dozen pairs of busy hands. They were trying to diaper him. The idea was so comic that he could not stop laughing enough to resist.

The four-footer said gravely: "Marry, 'tis no small problem with so lusty a babe. A very Wayland or Brian of Born when a gets growth, I'll warrant. Yet stay, friends; this is a wise, intelligent brat that talks like a lawyer, that is, never but to his own profit. He merely protests that we put the clout on over his breeches when it should go under. Come, once more!"

She gave a little leap, flapping her wings in excitement, and was bounced a dozen yards into the air by the effort. Barber gaped, following her with his eyes, and felt his pajamas seized by hands eager to tear them off him. He clutched, turned, and swung his arms in good, angry embarrassment. He broke loose—even the largest of them did not seem very strong—and backed against one of the trees, a torn pajama leg dangling about his feet. Half a dozen of those with wings were in the air. He could hear the whisper of their flight behind the tree, and a chilly hand, small like a child's, plucked from behind at the neck of his too-light upper garment.

"Listen!" he cried. "Unless this is one of those nightmares where you go down Fifth Avenue without your clothes, my name's Fred Barber, and I'll keep my pants, please. You can trust me not to disgrace them. Now, will somebody tell me what this is all about, and why you want to put that thing on me?"

He pointed to the enormous diaper, which had slipped from the hand of its holder and lay spread and tousled on the grass. There was a momentary silence, through which one or two of the aërial creatures planed lightly to the ground, spilling the air from their wings like pigeons.

THE BROWNIE with the wall eyes had stepped forward and was bowing to the ground. "Worshipful babe," he said, in a high, squeaky voice, "you do speak in terms rank reasonable; which, since all reason is folly and I am the court's chief fool, to wit, its philosopher, I give myself to answer in the same terms. As to your first premise, that you dream, why that's in nature a thing unknowable; for if it were true, the dream itself would furnish the only evidence by which it could be judged. You will agree, worshipful babe, that it's not good law, nor sense, neither, that one should be at once judge, jury, prosecutor and condemned in his own case. Therefore—"

He was thrust aside in midspeech by the little winged creature, who cried: "Oh, la! Never speak reasonably to a philosopher, Master Barber; it leads to much words and little wit. What this learned dunce would say in an hour or two is that you find yourself at the court of King Oberon—"

"As mortals have before," chorused half a dozen of them, singing the words like a refrain.

"—About to be made a present of to His Radiance—"

"Do you mean this is really Fairyland?" Barber's voice was incredulous. There was a great burst of laughter from the queer little people all around him, some holding their sides, some slapping knees, others rolling on the ground with mirth till they bumped into each other. Inconsequentially, they turned the movement into a series of acrobatic somersaults and games of leapfrog, laughing all the while.

"Where thought you else?" demanded the winged lady.

"I didn't. But look here—I'm not sure that I want to be a present to King Oberon, like a . . . like a—" His mind fumbled for the impressive simile, all the time busy with the thought that, in spite of its sequence and vividness, this must be some special kind of hallucination. "Like an object," he finished lamely.

She held up two little hands with jewels flashing on the fingers.

"Oh, la, Sir Babe, you to question the desire of a crowned king? Why, put it if you must that it's a thing natural, like being born or having two legs. You have no election in the matter. Nay, more—no mortal ever but gained by doing the king's will of fairyland."

Once more Barber experienced the operation of that curious sixth sense. There was something definitely untrue about that last statement. But this was his game; this was the kind of verbal fencing he had been trained in, and if this whole crazy business were an illusion, so much the better; he could argue himself out of it.

"No doubt," he said evenly, "I shall benefit. But

why pick on me? Certainly there must be dozens of people willing to be—pet poodles for King Oberon. You say it's a natural thing. Well, after all, nature has law, and I'd like to know under what one I was kidnaped. And I'm not a babe."

ONCE MORE there was the paroxysm of laughter from the crowd, and the ensuing antics. The winged lady looked bewildered and seemed about to burst into tears. But the brownie philosopher struggled from the grip of a dwarf who had been holding a hand over his mouth, and stepped forward, bowing.

"Nay, Lady Violanta," he said. "By your leave I'll speak, for I perceive by my arts that this is a most sapient babe, so well versed in precepts logical that he'll crush your feather spirit like a bull a butterfly. Let me but have him; I'll play matador to his manners." He bowed, addressing himself to Barber.

"Masterful babe, in all you say, you are wrong but once; that is, at every point and all simultaneous, like fly-blown carrion. Item: you do protest your age, which is a thing comparative, and with relation to your present company, you're but a bud, an unhatched embryo. Hence, we dispose of your fundamental premise, that you have years and wisdom to criticize the way the world is made to wag; which is an enterprise for sound, mature philosophical judgment.

"Item: 'tis evident advantage to everyone, man or moppet, when the world wags smooth. Indeed, whatever tranquillity exists in individual doings is but show and false seeming, like the bark on a rotten apple tree, till those matters that concern the general be at rest. Now, since there lies a coil between our king and queen that can only be dispersed by the presentation of a changeling from Her Resplendency to His Radiance, the said changeling should take great heart and good cheer at having introduced into the world some portion of harmony that cannot but reflect or exhibit itself in what concerns him more nearly. Now—"

"Yes, but—"

"I crave your grace." He bowed. "Item the third: it is good natural law and justice, too, that you should be chosen. For by old established custom it is demanded of those mortals who have commerce with us that they offer the geld or get of a bowl of milk on St. John's Eve. Now, since your parents failed of this duty, worshipful babe, when snoring Sneckett yonder came, he was clearly possessed of the right of leaving an imp or changeling in your room."

"Marry," broke in the winged fairy, "and that's not all he was possessed of, to bring such a great, ugly hulking creature!"

Scholastic logic, Barber told himself; if this whole queer business were hallucination, this part just might be something his mind had dredged out of the subconscious memory left by college days. There was no use arguing with the old fellow; he'd crawl through a keyhole.

"You needn't rub it in," said Barber. "I know I'm no beauty. But I am hungry."

The winged fairy said: "That's a malady we can mend. Who has the bottle?"

A MILK BOTTLE with a rubber nipple appeared, and was passed to Barber. He examined it at arm's length for a moment, grinned, pulled off the nipple, and emptied it in a few large gulps. It was milk; he could taste it. Hooray. He felt better. The fairies were murmuring astonishment.

"Thanks," he said, "but I'm still hungry. How about some real food?"

The fairy looked severe. "Sugar-tits have we none. Is't possible you're schooled to sturdier meat?"

"I'll say I am. I'm schooled to bacon and eggs and coffee for breakfast. How about it?"

"Coffee? Oh, fraudulent Sneckett! He told us that the folk of your land drank tea."

"They do. I'm just peculiar—lots of ways. I prefer coffee." Barber ground the words a trifle, the suggestion of tea for breakfast capping his annoyance over the constant references to his babyhood. In the service, where one obtained a senior consulship only through white hair and the ability to compare digestive disorders with other old sots, he had been known as "Young" Barber.

Violanta shrugged and spoke into the crowd. A gangling sprite with pointed, hairy ears shuffled up with a tray which contained nothing but a quantity of rose petals.

"What the devil!" exclaimed Barber.

"Your eggs and coffee, sweet babe—or since it's a mortal child, would I say Snookums?"

"Not if you value your health, you wouldn't. And this stuff may look like food to you, but to me it's just posies. I might go for it if I were a rabbit."

"Stretch forth your hand."

He did so; the rose petals turned into a substantial breakfast complete with silver in a recognizable Community pattern. He picked up the coffee cup, sniffed, and peered at it suspiciously. It seemed all right. He squatted on the ground with the tray on his lap and tasted. The result made him gag; it was exactly the rose-flavored coffee served in Hindu restaurants, and a thrill of fear shot through him as he realized this was the perfect pattern of hallucination, the appearance of one thing and the actuality of another.

Violanta caught his expression of dismay. "Your pardon, gracious and most dear Barber-babe," she said, "if the flavor wants perfection. A knavish shaping has turned our spells to nought, and all here have lived on flower leaves since."

"Not very nourishing, I'd say," remarked Barber, sniffing hungrily and remembering that dreadful Yorkshire supper he had toyed with in what now seemed a past a thousand years deep.

"Oh, as to that, fear nothing. 'Twill nourish you featly, though it have the taste of adder's venom."

It might just as well, thought Barber, munching away and trying to forget the heavy, sweet flavor that went with the meal. At least the texture was real enough, in-

dubitably that of bacon and eggs. He finished and laid knife and fork on the tray with a little clink just as the crowned woman came sweeping through the grove again. Barber laid aside the tray and stood up, making the courtliest bow he could manage with a torn pajama leg dangling around one ankle.

"May I offer my respects to Her Most Resplendent Majesty, Queen Titania?" he said in his best diplomatic manner. "And offer her my services to the small extent of my powers?"

She looked so pleased that her expression became a positive simper. "So young and so well-taught!" she said. "I perceive my Violanta has not wasted time. Why, aye; since your offer is fairly made it will be as gladly accepted, and you shall be my messenger of amity before His Radiance. Would that delight you?"

Barber bowed again. "I can't think of anything I'd like better." He might as well, he told himself, play out the string; behave as though this whole crazy business were real and as much a part of his life as, say, the Luftwaffe bombing London.

"Then let's away," said the queen. "My coach!"

A wide-mouthed imp, dressed in a blue tabard with an intricate design of silver crescents woven onto it, dropped from the tree branch where he had been sitting and shouted in a voice of surprising volume: "Ho! The queen's coach!"

Somewhere among the trees another voice took up the cry, then another and another off into the distance, "The queen's coach! The queen's coach!" The coach rolled into the glade before the last shout died away, a structure like that used ceremonially by the Lord Mayor of London, if anything more elaborate, more gilded, and drawn by six white horses.

Two footmen leaped down from the tail; Barber noted with a jar of surprise that they were enormous frogs, in appearance and costume duplicates of those Tenniel had drawn for "Alice in Wonderland." He was diplomat enough not to allow this to upset him, but stepped forward and handed Queen Titania in. She smiled graciously, and opened her mouth to speak, but just at that moment the outrider beside the frog-coachman lifted a trumpet and blew a series of piercing notes. The queen motioned Barber to join her. He hopped in. The horses started, and they moved off, surrounded by running, flying and shouting fairies. Barber's last glimpse of the glade showed him the brownie philosopher doing a startling series of Catharine wheels behind the vehicle.

III.

THE grove was a mere screen of trees; once through it they were in an enormous landscaped park where tall blossoms on stalks grew in mathematical precision, interspersed with elms and maples set out in oversize flowerpots. There was no road, but the frog-coachman seemed to know where he was going, and they rolled along easily. They came to a stop with another trumpet flourish and the appearance of the frog-footmen at the door. Barber handed the queen down.

Behind a row of the flowerpot trees a factory chimney jutted into the air with a yellow-and-blue flag hanging limply from a mast at its peak. "Well met," said the queen, "his majesty's in residence at the palace. Come, babe." And she started toward it.

The grass between was set with a maze of fountains, playing high with moon rainbows through their spray. From one of them a voice suddenly chanted, *basso profundo:* "Rocked in the cra-a-dul of the de-ee-ee-eep!"

Bombing is notoriously bad for the nerves. Barber jumped and caromed into Queen Titania; both sat down. The water of the fountain heaved itself up into an anthropomorphous shape, like a translucent snowman, and stared at him from lidless eyes.

"Blow me down, here's a sniveling mortal!" it boomed. "And rouncing round the queen! You bag of tripes, I'll better your behavior!" A transparent arm shot out, the fingers clutching for Barber's face. He ducked, threw up a hand to ward the grip, and bumped the queen again as water splashed all over him. The rest of the aqueous monster subsided into a plain fountain, with a Neptunian bellow: "Ho-ho-ho! Did you see it jump? Haw-haw-haw!"

"Haw-haw-haw!" came an echoing burst of laughter from the other fountains, as the one that had splashed Barber burst into deep-voiced song:

"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest,
Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum!
Drink and the devil had done for the rest—"

All the fountains were coming in on the second "Yo, ho, ho—" as Barber scrambled up and offered Queen Titania his hand. She disdained it and leaped to her feet, her good nature gone.

"You clay-headed oaf, you clumsy tallow ketch!" she blazed in a quietly deadly voice. "Were't not that you are a mere object, a toy for a better man, I'd have you to the strappado! I'll—"

Barber bowed. "A thousand pardons, Your Resplendency! I was only trying—"

She advanced furiously, cocking a fist. "Trying! I'll try you, and in a star-chamber fashion!"

Barber backed, then looked around to make sure he had sea room, for the living fountains were shouting and singing all around behind him. As he did so his eye caught a figure—a small, thin-haired man in doublet and hose, with a sandy mustache and a six-inch diamond hanging from a chain around his neck. Titania saw him at the same time as Barber; she lowered her arm as the man hurried up.

"How now?" he said. "Why, it's my sweet cowslip, my pretty helpmate, and with her feathers ruffled like a mourning dove! What—"

"Spare your sarcasms, my lord," snapped the queen. "Here's your changeling, and good riddance. Now do I get my little Gosh?"

King Oberon looked at Barber. "This great woolsack jobbernowl a changeling?"

"Aye, and I give you joy of him. Just now the lightsome ox strewed my royal dignity upon the path."

"Ha, ha! Would I had seen it. If you dislike him so, the colt must have better points than show in his teeth."

"Why, you starveling stick—" Titania suddenly seemed to recollect that she had come not to quarrel, but to get something she wanted by exchange. Her face underwent a lightning transformation. "In very faith, it's not so useless a wretch; can argue, stretch a point like a philosopher. Will you not take it, give me my Gosh and set our affairs once more to their wonted smoothness? My lord knows full well there has been another shaping."

The king rubbed his chin. "Full well, indeed. I cast a spell for a hunting lodge and get these cursed, crank living fountains. I'm still not won to your thought that the variance between us lies at the root of these shapings. But 'tis most evident they are thereby increased in effect, like a pox with exercise, since we can receive in our affairs only what we put forth. So, since you wish it, madam, let there be peace between us."

The fairies, who had been crowding around, went into shouts of delight over this announcement, and began the same series of antics Barber had seen them perform before. Titania's smile, though gracious, was a trifle glassy.

"And my little Gosh?" she asked.

Oberon swallowed, then lifted his voice and shouted: "Gosh!" There was no answer. He tried again. Still no response. "Herald!" he called.

A SPRITE, the twin of the one who had called the queen's coach save that his tabard bore a design of suns, somersaulted into position, opened his mouth and shouted: "Chandra Holkar Raghunath Tippu Vijayanagar Rao Jaswant Rashtrakuta Lallabhbhai Gosh! Come forth, you misbegotten imp, you villainous standing-tuck, you—"

"Here, sir," said a dark-skinned boy of about twelve, appearing suddenly. "Did you call, O Pearl of Wisdom?"

"Call? Aye, and for the last time. Take the brat, then, my lady, and let me call myself well shut of him."

Chandra Holkar Raghunath Tippu Vijayanagar Rao Jaswant Rashtrakuta Lallabhbhai Gosh stood grinning unregenerately, with his feet apart and two small thumbs hooked into his sash. He bowed to Titania. "Am I truly to be yours again, O Star of Beauty and Queen of Felicity?"

"Aye," said Titania. "Come, my babe. Let's to our chambers."

The boy winked at Barber. Oberon's mouth suddenly fell open. "It's not to be done," said he.

"And wherefore not?"

"There's a matter—they are not fit—" Barber experienced for the third time, and stronger than ever, the sixth sense that told him the man was lying. But Oberon rushed on: "That is, I did prepare your apartment against your coming and it is but now all betousled and lumbered with new decoration. Since you left my bed—"

"It stayed cold not long, I'll warrant," said Titania, her foot beginning to tap dangerously.

Oberon's fists clenched, and the diamond danced on his chest. "Fie! Fah! By bold Beelzebub's brazen—look you, who are you to talk, wench, with a changeling in your train whose beard sprouts and fists are like footballs! Call me kobbold if he's not good for more games than ring-around-a-rosy." Before Titania could retort, he swung suddenly on Barber. "Sirrah! How long have you known my wife? Quick and true or turn to a frog!"

"If you mean how long since I met the lady," said Barber, his sixth sense warning him that there was something phony about this outburst, "maybe an hour. If you mean—"

"Enough; let be. Your reply's ample."

"But not yours to me," said Titania. "Come, Gosh, we'll see what 'tis my lord is so desirous to conceal." She swept regally toward the factory chimney, followed by the boy.

Oberon muttered after her: "Wish her joy of her conquest. He's found a taste for felonious magic—oh, a perfect accomplished young cutpurse— Yet, now what's to do?" He looked wildly from side to side, then seized Barber's arm. "Your name, fellow!"

"Barber."

"Marry, a most proper one to the emergency, since here's a great bloated business to be bled docile. Art trustworthy?" He poked his face close, then went on rapidly: "No matter; it's a case of trust and be damned, or doomed for lack of trust. Harkee, fellow Barber: there be two entrances to my lady's apartment, by the staircase and through our royal rooms. Do you take the nearer while we move with her ladyship by the longer route. Will find a wench there . . . ha, ha, 'tis a babe of parts; I see you take my meaning. Well, spirit her away; exorcise her, by any means. Come!"

Still gripping Barber's arm, the king went across the grass after Titania in a series of bounds, dragging the other with him. They were together at the entrance to the chimney, which proved to have surprising interior dimensions and a helical staircase that went up and up. "Pox take these villain shapings!" panted Oberon, as they climbed, "that will not let us mount by the old Fairyland method of a word and aloft. Ouf!"

He came to a halt on a landing opposite a brown, iron-bound door, and, as the other two continued out of sight, yanked out a key and pressed it into Barber's hand. "So, and nimbly," he whispered, then bounded up the stairs after the queen.

There seemed no lock or even latch on the door. Wondering why he had been given the key, Barber pushed. He found himself in a kind of sitting room with tapestry-covered benches along the walls wherever they were not cut by archways. Each of the latter led to another room on a different level, some up, some down. He raced from door to door, seeing nothing promising till he reached one that gave on a room in which an elaborate gold-and-damask four-poster bed was visible, with another door beyond. That ought to be it.

The key? But this door was as innocent of keyholes as that on the stairway. Perhaps it was bolted on the other side. He knocked. The wood emitted a dull sound, indicative of solidity, but there was no answer. Using the metal key to make the noise louder he knocked again. Instantly the door swung open. He found himself looking across a wide apartment at an extremely pretty girl in a thin dress, seated before a mirror and winding something starry into her hair. She had wings.

At the sound of Barber's entry she turned a startled face in his direction. "The queen!" he said. "Oberon says for you to clear out."

The girl's mouth fell open. There was the sound of another door somewhere, accompanied by Titania's penetrating voice.

The girl leaped from her stool and dashed to a closet. In a matter of seconds she was out with an armful of silky garments and a wad of fancy shoes in one hand. She scooted past Barber as he held the door for her. He pulled it to behind them.

"Lock, quickly!" she said. "You have the key?"

Barber gazed uncomprehendingly from the lockless door to the instrument he still held clutched in his hand.

"Ah, stupid!" she cried. She snatched it from his hand, passed it through the loop-shaped handle, muttering something meanwhile, and turned to examine him from top to toe. "A changeling babe, I'll warrant," she said finally, "else you had not been so ignorant of means. Even shapings alter not these."

Barber felt a surge of irritation over these continual references to his babyhood. "I suppose you could call me a changeling," he replied, a trifle coldly, "but I'm not a baby—by any means. Permit me to present myself. I am Fred Barber, of—" He took a step backward to bow as he made the formal introduction. As he did so the pit of his knee touched the edge of a chair and he went down into it, with no damage but loss of dignity.

An expression of surprise flashed over her face, and she gave a tittering laugh. "Oh, la, Sir Changeling," she said, "to take advantage of a poor girl so! No babe, indeed, but a very Don Cupid. Well"—she put her head on one side and surveyed him brightly, like a bird—"I've played pat-lips with less lovely lords, so let's on."

"Huh?"

The girl dropped her armful of clothes, took two quick steps, and was on Barber's lap, with both arms round his neck. "'Ware my wings," she said. Her hair had a faint perfume.

"Hey!" said Barber, though not at all displeased by the sensation. "What have I done to deserve this?"

Her eyes widened. "Is't possible you are so ignorant, sweet simpleton? Yet, I forget—you are a stranger. Why, then, you took a single chair, not a bench nor the floor, nor offered me a place to sit, and we're alone. In the exact custom of our realm, that is to say you wish to play lob-lolly—oh, shame! And I thought you meant it!" Her face flushed.

There was a knock at the inner door.

"That's Oberon," said Barber. "I really did mean it, but—"

"Ho, Barber!" came the king's voice, muffled by the door.

"Alack for might-have-been," said the girl, and kissed him.

"Ha, Barber fellow! Open!" came from the door.

The girl slid to her feet, gathered her gowns and slippers with a single motion, danced over to the window, and leaped lightly to the sill. Barber jumped up, but before he could reach the window she was gone, her gauzy wings glittering on the downbeat in the moonlight. He returned to the door and tapped it with the key. It opened to reveal Oberon talking amicably with Titania and Gosh. "So, a good day, then my love," said the king, "and good-hap."

He bowed, came through and closed the door after him, then clapped Barber on the back. "Well, and wisely done, fellow! You have our royal favor. But, hist, take an older man's advice—if you must make merry with our Fairyland doxies, choose one without wings."

"Why?" asked Barber, wondering how much Oberon

knew about the incident in the chair, and how he could know.

"Take thought, man. Merely imagine."

"Oh."

"Now then, to the next matter—your garb. It's not fit for the court. Stand here before me."

Oberon made a series of rapid passes with his hands, reciting:

> "One, two, three, four,
> Doublet and hose, such as Huon bore;
> Yksi, koksi, kolme, neljä,
> Clothe him here in cut engraily;
> Ichi, ni, san, shi,
> Garb him then, as he should be—"

Fred Barber felt a soft impact. He looked down, and to his horror found himself covered with a complete suit of tree frogs—hundreds of them, clinging in a continuous layer by their sucker-toed feet. He yelped and jumped. All the tree frogs jumped, too, cascading over the floor, the furniture, and the frenzied king, who was bouncing with rage.

"Ten thousand devils!" he shrieked. "Pox, murrain, plague, disaster upon this stinking puke-stocking shaping! I'll—"

Barber recovered first, bowing amid the leaping batrachians. His diplomatic training made him remember that distraction was the first step in curing a fury like this. "I beg your majesty's pardon for making so much trouble. But if I may trouble you still further, would you explain to me what this shaping is? If I am to serve your majesty, it seems I ought to know about it."

Oberon's rage came to a halt in midflight. He rubbed his chin. "The curse of our domain, and insult to our sovereignty, lad. If with your mortal wit you can do aught to alter them, all favor's yours to the half of the kingdom. Look you . . . you come from a land where natural law is immutable as the course of the planets. But in our misfortunate realm there's nought fixed; the very rules of life change at times, altogether, without warning and in no certain period—Oh, fear nothing; we'll have the royal tailor in to—"

"And these changes are called shapings?"

"Aye; you have hit it. There's an old prophecy gives us to hope, somewhat about a hero with a red beard, whose coming will change the laws of these laws, but I'm grown rank skeptic in the matter. There is this also, that with each shaping, things grow faintly worse, by no more than a mustard seed, D'you understand? Yon fairies in the queen's train, when once they began playing, hopped happily all night. Now they grow tired, need a new stimulus, which accounts for my lady's humor, who likes joy about her. And there's my great jewel, that before the last shaping had the property of—Why, where's the bauble?"

Oberon looked down at the starry front of his doublet. "'Tis gone—I know, 'twas that small brown fiend, the Hindu cutpurse. I've been robbed! I—the king—robbed in my *own royal palace!*" Oberon hopped around the room like one of the tree frogs. "Devils burn him! Scorpions sting him! Lightning fry him! The sanguine little cheat, the stinking blackguard!"

Barber gave up and put his fingers in his ears. When the torrent had died down a trifle, he removed them and asked, "Why doesn't your majesty tan his hide? Sounds as though he needed discipline."

"Discipline him? Titania dotes on him *in extremis*, and he's her ward. I can do nothing, though he intends murder most foul, without oversetting what little law remains in this plagued land. Ah, faugh! Never wear a crown, Barber fellow; 'tis light enough on the brow, but on mind and heart heavy." He yawned. "To bed; get you gone, the third arch by the left if the room's still there after this last foul shaping. An elf will attend you."

Barber left the king unlacing his shoes and singing away to himself quite cheerfully:

> *"But when I came, alas! to wive,*
> *With hey, ho, the wind and the rain;*
> *By swaggering could I never thrive,*
> *For the rain it raineth every day"*

The room was still there, but with neither glass nor curtains to the windows, and the level lines of a morning sun streaming across the floor. Apparently the nocturnal fairies went to sleep as naturally in a glare of sunlight as mortals did in darkness. Barber wondered if he could do the same. He thought maybe he could, having been up all night, and turned back the covers of the enormous silk-covered bed that nearly filled the room. As he lay down it occurred to him that there was something particularly undreamlike in falling asleep in a dream; and that going calmly to sleep was hardly in tune with any form of insanity. This gave him a fine sense of satisfaction in the actuality of the experience till he remembered that Oberon had described the experience itself as utterly lawless. Still trying to unravel the logical difficulties this involved, he drifted off.

IV.

He was awakened by a gentle clearing of the throat. The sound went on and on, as diminutive as a mouse's alarm clock. Barber ignored it till he found he would have to turn over anyway, then opened his eyes.

A small, wizened elf with a leather bag in one hand stood by his bed. "Gweed-morrow, young sir," said this manikin. "I'll be the tailor royal. His Radiance bade me attend ye."

Barber slid out of bed, his toes searching futilely for slippers that were not there. The elf whipped out a tape measure with markings spaced unevenly as though an inch were sometimes one length, sometimes another.

"Hm-m-m," said the tailor. "Ye're an unco great stirk of a mortal. But I'll fit ye; I'll jacket ye and breek ye and cap ye." He began pulling clothes from the bag—underwear and a shirt and a pair of trunks that bulged around the hips. All went well till Barber began trying on jackets with pinched waists and leg-of-mutton sleeves. His squarish, straight-lined torso had

no median joint to speak of. The elf grunted, "Too muckle wame," thrust the largest of the jackets back into the bag, muttered something, and took it out again.

This time the waist was all right, but Barber complained: "It's still tight across the back of the shoulders."

The elf helped him take the jacket off and felt of his shoulder blades. Barber was conscious that the probing fingers touched a little point of no-sensation, like an incipient boil, on each scapula. The tailor whistled. "Heuch! Ye'll be having a rare pair o' wings afore ye're mickle older. I maun make ye a wingity coat."

"What?"

The elf was speaking "—wear that ane until I get your wingity jacket made. Noo the collar." The tailor pulled from the bag a starched ruff that was probably ten inches in diameter, though it looked thirty.

"Is that a collar or do I wear it around my middle?" demanded Barber.

The wrinkled face remained solemn. "A collar. It buttons tae your sark. It's a coort regulation."

"Oh, well," said Barber, "I've taken off my shoes for the Son of Heaven, worn white tie and tails at noon for the President of the Third Republic, and put on silk knee britches for the King of Spain. I guess I can stand it." The tailor put the ruff on him, standing on tiptoe to button it. "How the devil do you eat in one of these things?"

"Tip your head weel froward, and 'ware the gravy."

Barber turned to the tailor. "What's your name?"

"Angus, sir."

"How old are you, Angus?" If he could keep talking, plunge himself deeply enough in the objective world, however irrational that objective world might at the moment seem, the real, rational world in which he was actually living must break through to the level of consciousness.

"Twelve hundred and fifty, sir."

Once more, stronger than ever, Barber had the sensation of being in the presence of a lie. He grinned: "How old are you, really, Angus?"

The respectful look became a grimace of uneasiness. "Weel, your young lairdship mustna gie me awa, but I'll be fifteen hundred and ninety-ane years auld, come —"

"That's all right. You don't look a day over a thousand." The small victory gave Barber a comforting sense of superiority. "Suppose you tell me something about this country. What are we bounded by?"

"Fat's that?"

"What's north of here? Ditto with east, south and west."

"That depends on which way north is, sir. Maist times, 'tis straight up. The last time 'twere doon, 'twas in the direction of the Kobold Hills."

"And what are the Kobold Hills?"

Angus shifted his feet and tucked the mirror into his jerkin, where it disappeared without leaving a bulge. "The hills where the kobolds be," he said.

"Who are the kobolds?" Fairies of some sort, he remembered from youth, but the word might have a special meaning.

"I dinna really ken, sir." His eyes avoided; the falsehood was so obvious that the elf himself felt it. "If your clothes are satisfactory, sir, I'll tak my leave." Without waiting for more he whisked out of the room.

Barber called after him: "How about a razor—" but too late. A fingertip assured him of the stubble on his chin, but none of the furniture contained anything that was the least use in such an emergency, so he shrugged and went into the entry hall to look for the king.

The archway to the royal rooms showed nothing, but from another came the sound of voices and Barber rightly guessed this must be the breakfast room. It was long and high-ceilinged, with huge, arched glassless windows—didn't it ever rain or get cold here, he wondered?—and the astonishing bright moonlight of fairyland streaming in. But the center of his eye was taken up by the table and its occupants.

It was twenty feet or more long, covered with a damask cloth that dripped to the floor, and from the far end Titania faced him, regal and smiling. Behind her stood Gosh and the brownie philosopher; uniformed footmen bustled. At the other end, with his back to Barber, sat Oberon, also with two attendants. The king had just finished eating something; one of the footmen whisked a gold plate from under his nose, and four tall goblins with spindling legs and huge puffed cheeks, standing stiffly midway down the table, lifted silver trumpets and blew. Their music was like that which Barber had heard from the gallery at the coronation of George VI.

Titania had seen him and indicated his direction through the music with a wave of her hand. Oberon turned. "Ho, it's the Barber fellow!" he cried. "Ha, slugabed! Approach, approach."

Another dish had appeared before him. He transferred part of the contents to a plate and handed it to a footman. "To Barber, with our royal compliments," he said. Instantly one of the trumpeters blew a blast like an elaborated version of an army mess call.

Barber looked around for a chair. There were none in the room except those occupied by the king and queen, so he supposed he would have to eat standing up. The food was pale-blue in color and strongly flavored with violet; Barber, who had never been able to get used to the English habit of sweets with breakfast, found it perfectly abominable. Fortunately he was spared the worst effects of the king's generosity, for no sooner had he taken a couple of mouthfuls than Oberon was beckoning him to the table.

"Harkee, Barber—"

Whatever else he was going to say was drowned in another outburst from the goblin trumpeters. Titania had changed plates. Oberon's face writhed, he brought his fist down on the table, but the queen was quicker in catching the precise moment when the tooting stopped.

"My very dear lord and gossip," her bell-like voice rang out, "you do forget your guest. A wight that casts his shadow wants nourishing." She handed a plate to one of her footmen. "Our royal compliments to Master Barber, and may he prefer this to the last dish." He did; it tasted like steak.

Oberon slapped his forehead with an open palm. "Oh, apologies, Barber; we crave your grace. Now on the matter of this achievement; it's the koboldS."

"What about them?" asked Barber, munching away.

"We fear they're making swords again to ruinously vex our realm. The beat of forging hammers comes from their hills, and has a droll ring to it, as though they were not working good honest bronze but—iron."

He let the last word drop slowly; as he did so the footmen started and one of them dropped a plate.

"I still don't see—"

"Why, halt 'em, thwart 'em, confound their knavery! You're mortal; plainly you can handle the stuff."

The brownie philosopher at the other end of the table was bowing like a jack-in-the-box. Titania said: "You have our permission. For two minutes only, though."

"Gracious lord, gracious lady," he piped. "'Tis clear to my arts that this changeling stands before you uncomprehending, like a bull in a buttery. What's to do, a asks, and Your Radiance but gives him commands, when it's a sapient babe that will see to the heart of the millstone."

He bowed to Barber and squeaked on: "These kobolds are a race that consort not with us, loving labor like Egyptians. Which I take it to be—"

"Ahem!" said Oberon loudly.

The brownie philosopher bowed three times, hurriedly. "Now the minds of these kobold cattle are so fashioned that since they alone, of all Fairyland, have the power of touching iron, they make of fashioning that metal an inordinate vainglory, preferring it to all others that—"

Titania silently held up two fingers.

"Yes, gracious lady— And would therefore forge swords at every opportunity. Which swords, being distributed, do set all Fairyland at the most horrid strife and variance, with bloodletting and frequent resultant shapings—"

Bang! Oberon's fist came down. "A truce to babble! Here's the riddle; we of pure fairy blood cannot go to the Kobold Hills, which stink of the curst metal. Thus you're our emissary."

Barber's ear had caught the slight accent on the word "pure." "Because I'm of impure fairy blood, I suppose?" he questioned lightly.

"Wherefore else, good Barber?"

He laughed, but it died out against the unaltered faces around him. "Who was your mother's mother, sir?" asked Titania's clear contralto.

"I—don't know." He had always assumed he had two grandmothers, like everyone else. They came in pairs. But looking up family trees had always struck him as a sport that led either to the D. A. R. or the booby-hatch, places he was equally anxious to avoid. Oberon pressed against his confusion.

"There are brooks also since the last shaping—plagued ungainly obstacles to us of the pure blood, who must seek around by their sources or fly high above, but not for you, mortal. Go, then, we say; be our embassy, our spy."

"And if I do, can I get back to where I came from? After all, I have work—"

"Why, you unhatched egg, you chick-cuckoo, will you bargain against the King's Radiance of Fairyland? Go to! I'll—"

The brownie philosopher was wriggling in a passion of desire for speech, but Titania signed him to speak. Oberon, catching sight of the motion, pulled himself up short.

The brownie philosopher exhaled a long breath at being allowed to speak.

"Ha! Your Radiance, Your Resplendency!" He bowed rapidly toward one end of the table and then the other. "'Ware this changeling lad, I say. I have hunted his aptitude to its lair as he thought on't but now. He'll set your court by the ears, for he can tell lies from truth whenever spoken."

Oberon leaned back in his chair and unexpectedly burst into laughter. All the footmen, butlers and goblin trumpeters obediently imitated him. One of the latter laughed a series of bubbling toots into his instrument, and got Barber himself to laughing. Only Titania and Gosh kept their composure. He noticed that the latter was making a rapid series of passes with his hands and moving his lips. The mound of blue on Oberon's plate vanished; the boy chewed and swallowed.

"Ho—ho, 'tis rare, rank rare," gasped Oberon, coming out of his laughing fit by degrees. "Well, my pretty cosset, how think you now on your bargain? You have your little felon, ha, ha, but I've gained me a counselor that shall make you both jig a step or two. Tell me, good Barber, what is your profession?"

"I was in the diplomatic service."

"There 'tis; those who gain a faculty by commerce with us get generally one that would be most useful whence they came. Though meseems 'twould have been nearer the eye to have the power of making your own lies believed."

Titania smiled, only half ruefully. "Then all's well, my lord, if Imponens has but justly judged. It's a sharp archer indeed that never misses the heart."

Oberon had picked up his fork as she spoke, and now his eye fell on the empty plate before him. "We'll put it to the proof," he said, and pointed at Gosh. "You imp! Did you beguile my breakfast but now? Mark his answer, good Barber."

The dark little face took on an expression of bland impudence. "Oh, Gem of Glory," he began, but Titania came to his rescue:

"My noble lord, do we not but bandy while our sovereign purpose waits? Here's this Barber, an approved

ambassador, whom we are anxious to speed, yet we sit jousting in wind like a pair of sguittards— Gosh! My magic wand; I left it in the apartment. Our messenger shall bear it."

The boy strolled toward one of the doors with his nose in the air and an expression of nonchalance. As he passed the king, Oberon growled: "Beat it hence, you bepuked little mandrake!" but it was covered from Titania's attention by Barber's own remark:

"How am I supposed to use this wand?"

"That," said the queen, "is something you must learn by experience; no other teacher."

"Aye," added Oberon, "and mark well, Barber; whatever happens, use no physical force against the kobolds."

"Why not?"

"You're outnumbered, one to a thousand. Yet, there's a better reason, however high your heart run; these wights are of such nature that they be held under certain bonds against passing to open violence. But if it be first used on them, they are released and can reply in

overweening measure. No striking then; sheer skill."

"But," cried Barber, "you want me to stop them from making swords, but I can't use force. You won't tell me what to do or how to use even the wand."

"You named yourself diplomat, not we. Sure, you're a poor stick in the profession an' you have not met such tasks before— Ha, here's the wand."

He took it from Gosh and handed it to Barber. It did not look in the least as it had when Titania used it on Sneckett the evening before, but like an ivory walking stick. The handle end came round in a crook with a carved snake's head terminal.

"Watch it well," warned Titania. "This wand has an enchantment in it; if it be lost, all concerned, including your sweet self, will come on some misadventured piteous overthrow. Go then, and good luck with you."

V.

THE park, with its fantastic potted trees and eight-foot blossoms, stretched farther from the tower than Barber had imagined. Nobody there had been able to give him any sensible directions to the Kobold Hills. "Take the path and ask as you go," they had said. "The wand will help you."

What path? Ask whom as you go?

Yet at this point it looked as though he would have to ask somebody soon. The path, narrowed to an alley by parallel hedges, flowed into an opening filled with a round bed of the huge flowers. Beyond hedges closed in again, smoothly green, joining the flowerbed at its back, so that he must definitely choose between turning right or left. The grass gave no clue; both directions showed the high color that had hitherto been his guide. Everything was still as the moon itself, flooding the scene with cold light, not a sound, not a motion, not a sign of breeze.

"Hey!" said Fred Barber.

No answer. Not an echo, either; the foliage muffled his shout.

The indifference of this landscape had become nerve-wracking. He addressed a zinnia the size of a cabbage on a stalk towering over his head: "I wish you could tell me which way to the Kobold Hills," he said aloud.

The blossom showed no intention of doing so. Damn this whole business! Unfair. His mind vaulted back to the incident at college when somebody had blown sneeze powder through the old-fashioned hot air inlet into the room where the faculty dinner was being held. Very funny, but not for Fred Barber, who was student president, and knew that the priceless young fool who did it would get the whole college confined to campus in Junior Week if he didn't own up. He pointed the ivory wand accusingly at the zinnia:

"Confound it, can't you see you're just making it tough for all of us without helping yourself? Which of these paths goes to the Kobold Hills?"

The zinnia courteously bowed its head toward the path on the right. Barber gazed at the other flowers in the bed; there was still no wind, not a leaf had rustled, not another flower head changed. He pointed the stick at a bachelor's-button the size of a ten-gallon hat: "Do you agree?" he demanded.

The huge flower returned his stare immobile and impassive. Experimental proof was wanting.

His shoulder blades itched in unscratchable places. He stopped and reached around with the crook of the walking stick-wand, and could plainly feel the bumps that Angus had informed him were incipient wings. Fred Barber with wings. He tried to picture to himself the commotion at the embassy if he walked in on them with a pair of great feathered appendages springing from his shoulders. He could imagine old Houghton babbling at the sight, with his smug face of a satisfied sheep. And would an authentic winged man have precedence at dinner over a military attaché? If he knew his embassies, the question ought to be good for at least eight hours of argument.

WELL, he was out of that now, perhaps permanently, and just ahead of him the hedges were falling away to side and side from another crotch in the road. Between the two forks were flowers, mingled with a perfect forest of the potted trees, and in front of them a man, or at least an individual, was standing on his head. The head was a large one, and the individual seemed perfectly comfortable, with arms and legs folded. At the sound of Barber's footfall he opened a large green eye.

"Beg pardon," said Barber, "but could you direct me to the Kobold Hills?"

The individual said: "What do you want to go there for?"

"Public business," said Barber, trying to make it sound important.

The individual yawned—it looked extremely odd in his position—and opened a second eye. "Not an original remark, my friend. You're the—let's see—forty-ninth mortal to go through here. They're always on public business. Forty-nine is seven times nine. I wouldn't go any farther."

"You're arithmetic's wrong, and whether I go or not is my business. How do I get there?"

The individual opened a third eye in the middle of his forehead. "No it isn't. It's only mortal affection for exact systems that makes you say that. I know all about Oberon's monkey-business with the kobolds. It's a waste of time. And you're mistaken about those colors. They call them green-grocers because they feel blue."

Barber had a sensation of trying to wade through mud, but clung manfully to the main issue. "Why is it a waste of time to do anything about the kobolds? They'll make trouble if they're not stopped, won't they?"

The individual closed two of his eyes. "Lots of trouble," he said cheerfully. "They'll lay the country waste. Your development is incomplete. You can't follow more than one line of reasoning at a time. That makes for errors."

"Then what's the objection to thwarting them?"

"It's an inevitable transition stage before we can have

anything better. If your development were complete you'd see that the kobolds were destined to sweep away the old corrupt order."

"What's corrupt about it?"

"So that's your line, is it? Very well; do you admit that perfection exists?"

"We-ell," said Barber doubtfully, "there's a word for it, so I suppose that in a sense—"

"Either a thing exists or it doesn't. If it exists in a sense it exists in all senses. Just as you're made not less a man by being an outsize, humpbacked mortal man."

"Go on," said Barber.

"Now if it exists it is patently worth striving for, isn't it?"

"I'll concede that for the moment."

"Fine. Now I'm sure you'll admit that Oberon is not perfect. He quarrels with his wife and keeps winged fairies in the bedroom while she's away."

"I suppose you could hardly call that perfection."

"Aha! Then since perfection is worth striving for, Oberon, being imperfect, is not worth striving for. He is corrupt and should be swept away. Q. E. D."

"But will the kobolds produce perfection?"

"Far more of it than Oberon. They outnumber him, a thousand to one, d'you see? Even if the unit quantity of perfection per individual were far lower, the total mass would work out higher."

"Listen," said Barber, in some exasperation, "I'd like to stand here and split hairs with you all night, but I've got a job to do. Which way to the Kobold Hills?"

"Then you admit I'm right?"

"I'll admit anything if I can be on my way."

"Then," said the inverted person calmly, "by admitting I'm right you admit implicitly that you are wrong. Therefore you don't want to go to the Kobold Hills."

"All the same, I'm going. Which way?"

The remaining eye closed wearily and the voice sank to a mumble. "Either one you like . . . or . . . perhaps both. Yes, I think—you'd better take—both."

Barber turned away and trudged resolutely down the left-hand fork, reflecting that he had taken the right at the last choice. Since there seemed no rules of sequence in this experience, he would probably come out nearest correct by doing exactly the opposite of what had been successful before. The way seemed clear enough in this direction, though beyond Three-eyes and his fork, the hedges closed in from both sides again and it wound around in the familiar involutions. Barber followed it around a sweeping curve, up a slope—and found himself approaching a fork whose center was occupied by a flowerbed with trees behind. In front of the flowers an individual was standing on his head.

"I told you it was no use," he remarked as Barber came up to him. "You don't really want to go to the Kobold Hills."

"Oh, yes, I do. I took the wrong fork last time, no thanks to you, but I'm going to take the other one this time." Barber stepped resolutely to the right.

Two of the green eyes came open. "Just a minute. It's only fair to warn you, my friend, that if you turn to the right, you'll come back here just the same. The way's longer and more fatiguing, though. Better go to the left again; you'll get here quicker."

Barber ignored him and strode resolutely down the right-hand path. After a little distance, however, he was obliged to admit that Three-eyes had been right about one thing. The path here was certainly more fatiguing. It climbed sharply. His foot struck an outcrop of rock. He looked down; instead of the lawnlike carpet on which he had been walking, the path underfoot was now nearly bare, except for rank tufts of yellowish vegetation, and ahead the rocks were more frequent. The hedges had changed character here, too. They were much taller, at least twenty feet, and had come in close to pinch the path to a mere passage. The turns, too, were no longer rounded curves but angles; and as Barber negotiated one of them, something caught and scraped across the back of his hand, leaving a scratch that showed little drops of blood. The hedges here had thorns.

He climbed. At a little summit the hedge on one side broke back to reveal a sandy depression. In the middle of it, a few yards from the path, was another native, with a long, horsy face, elaborately rigged out in some sort of tweedy material with a red silk sash sweeping diagonally down across his chest. He had a crooked stick in both hands and was violently banging it into the sand, throwing up little spurts with each stroke.

"Hello," said Barber.

The native glanced up, revealing a monocle on his face, swung the stick over his shoulder and brought it down again—*swish-thump!* "Thirty-four, sixty-two," said the native as a grain of sand landed in Barber's eye.

"Sorry," said the native curtly, shifted his feet, and drove the stick down again, so the next explosion of sand went off in another direction. "Thirty-five, sixty-seven," he remarked to himself.

Barber extracted the grain of sand, and asked: "Beg pardon, but can you tell me the way to the Kobold Hills?"

Swish-thump! "Thirty-three, sixty-one."

Barber raised his voice: "Hey, can you tell me—"

The monocled face swung round like a gun turret. "My good mortal, I'm not deaf."

"Then why don't you answer?"

"Can't."

"Oh, you mean you don't know."

"Certainly I know. But I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know you. We haven't been introduced. You might be some blighter."

Barber hovered between laughter and annoyance and compromised on a snort. "Look here," he said, "I'm on State business." He shook the wand. "Here's my credentials. Now suppose you—"

"No use, old thing. Awfully sorry and all that. Nothing personal."

"But it's important—"

"Oh, undoubtedly; I quite understand. Safety of the realm and all that." He elevated one hand and pointed the index finger at his forehead. "Ah, I have it! You find old Jib; lives down the road a bit. Literary chap, so it doesn't matter who he meets. He can make the introductions." He showed Barber a tweedy shoulder and swung again. "Forty-one, fifty-eight."

THE hedge-lined track plunged down sharply, angled, angled again, changed character to the original type of hedge-and-grass within a couple of hundred yards, and Barber found himself back at the fork in the roads, with the inverted sophist regarding him out of one green eye.

"You're beginning to develop. Now that you perceive the compelling logic of the situation, why not take the next step?" he said. "Give up this trip and align yourself with the forces of progress. A little temporary violence is necessary to achieve any great improvement."

Barber gripped the ivory wand and advanced grimly on Three-eyes. "Look here," he said, "I'm going to the Kobold Hills and if you don't tell me how to get there, there's going to be a little temporary violence right now."

The individual raised all three eyebrows—or, rather, lowered them, being upside down. "Are you threatening me, mortal?"

"You're damn right, I'm threatening you!"

"Evidently you will accomplish nothing against the kobolds."

"Why not?"

"The complaint is the manufacture and use of instruments of force, is it not? It's the one which that hidebound old nympholept Oberon usually makes."

"Yes," admitted Barber, drawn back into the argument in spite of himself.

"To prevent them," said Three-eyes triumphantly, "it is necessary for you to use an instrument of force on me. You thus adopt the methods of the kobolds. In the higher sense, which looks beyond externals, you *are* a kobold. Therefore, you cannot thwart them, because you would be thwarting yourself in the process. Q. E. D. OUCH!"

Barber had jabbed at him with the point of the wand, but before it made contact with the comfortable belly that instrument gave off a long streak of blue fire. It touched Three-eyes and ran all over him, leaving him shining with a phosphorescent light. The mouth flew open and the creature gasped:

"All right, I'll tell you. Take that thing away. I'm an elemental force. You can't get away from me till you propose a problem for which I can't find a logical solution— But I don't think you can do that," he added as Barber lowered the wand. "Mortals lack a sense of process." A smile of self-satisfaction spread across the inverted countenance. "Don't try Achilles and the tortoise on me; I know that one."

Barber fingered his chin in puzzlement, considering the question. There was no reaction from his newly developed instinct for lies; presumably this singular creature was perfectly right when he said he would have to be outargued. Yet how to do that? His fingers revealed a pronounced stubble of beard, far more than he should have grown in two nights and a day. It certainly needed the attention of either a barber or a Barber with a razor, which reminded him of being called, *ad nauseam*, "The Barber of Seville."

Three-eyes, who had shut all of them, opened one. "I thought so," he remarked. "Better give it up."

Barber of Seville! That was it—Bertrand Russell's paradox of the Spanish barber.

"By no means," he said, "Listen: suppose there's a village in Spain which nobody enters or leaves. In this village there is one barber, male and clean-shaven. If this barber shaves everybody in the village who does *not* shave himself; if he does *not* shave anybody in the village who does shave himself: who shaves the barber?"

"I should have mentioned that mortals who try to stick me and fail generally turn into parasites of some kind," said the creature. "Want to withdraw the question?"

"I'll take my chances," said Barber, gripping the wand firmly. It ought to be some protection.

"All right then." The eyes closed. "Let's see—if he does shave himself—by Hecate, then he doesn't—and if he doesn't, he does—"

BARBER TURNED, shaken with inward amusement. As he did so, the now-declining moon threw a new shadow along the hedge at the right. There was a narrow gap in it that he had not noticed before, and the brighter green of the grass in that direction showed a path led through it. He turned into it, but he had not followed it for more than twenty steps before a vivid blue flash from the crossroads paled the moonglow. *Boom!* The shock of an explosion almost took him off his feet.

When his eyes recovered from the glare, he walked quickly back to the gap in the hedge. Three-eyes had vanished.

Barber turned back, and saw he was going down a gentle slope toward a structure like a large metal hatbox. It had low windows all round, and a faint purring, as of machinery, came from within. In front of it, a bald and burly brown elf squatted on the grass. His left hand held open the pages of a book. An intricate system of flying trusses composed of small branches had been rigged to one of the potted trees just beside him to hold a cage containing half a dozen fireflies. Presumably they were to furnish light for his reading, but the solid bottom to the cage prevented them from being altogether a success. The elf did not appear to mind. His lips were moving rapidly as he followed the text, and with his other hand he was busily writing something on several sheets of paper, without noticing that his pen had run dry and was leaving no marks whatever.

"Pardon me," said Barber. "Is your name Jib by any chance?"

"Yes, yes," said the elf. "What can I do for you?

Quick, now; I'm writing down my thoughts about this book. I believe it will be my most important work."

"Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt you. Do you know the way to the Kobold Hills?"

"No, no, not now. I used to, but I haven't kept up with athletics recently. I have so much to do in directing the currents of intellectual opinion. You really must read my commentary on this book. It's about the theory of inverse value."

"Would you mind stepping along to introduce me to a fellow with a red sash who doesn't talk to strangers?"

"Yes, yes, surely. Very glad to. The author's theory is sound, but he makes several slight mistakes in arriving at the rationale of inverse values, with the result that he reaches the correct result by the wrong route. My commentary will clarify the whole matter."

"What whole matter?"

"Why, the theory of inverse values," said the elf, tucking the volume under his arm and joining Barber in the path.

"We can prove that nothing has any value."

"Huh?"

"Certainly. Look here: Obviously two oranges are worth twice as much as one orange."

"I suppose so."

"And one is worth half as much as two. That is, value is proportionate to quantity."

There seemed nothing to do but humor this helpful but argumentative sprite. "I see," said Barber.

"But as quantity approaches infinity, value becomes inverted. A thousand cubic feet of air has no value. The amount of air is, practically speaking, infinite. But if the amount of oranges in Fairyland were infinite? Suppose that, I say, suppose it."

"I am supposing it. What then?"

"Well, an orange is a fruit. You add to the amount of oranges in existence that of lemons, pomegranates, quinces, apples, et cetera, all the fruits that have a suppositious value. The result is a total practically infinite, as in the case of air. Therefore, all these fruits taken together must have an inverse value, or none at all, as in the case of air. And if the total sum has no value, the individual fractions—single oranges, for instance—have no value likewise. The last part is my commentary."

"Beg pardon," said Barber, "but isn't there a flaw in your reasoning—"

"Not at all, not at all, my dear fellow. Mechanically perfect. Cured my orbulina. Here's Cyril now." They had climbed out of the declivity, and Barber saw the same fairy, whacking away and muttering, "Forty-four, eighteen." Evidently they were on the opposite side of his clearing than Barber had approached before; he could see the tall thorn hedges beyond.

"What's your name?" demanded Jib. "Barber? I say, Cyril! I want you to meet my old friend Barber."

"Right-ho," said the tweedy native, with energetic cordiality. "Delighted; charmed. How can I help you?"

Barber repeated the now-wearisome question.

"Oh, surely," said Cyril. "Only too glad. Keep right along this path, but—let's see, this is Monday, what? Then you have to take the left fork at the first turning. Carry right on till you reach *the* forest. You'll have to ask your way after you get into it, I'm afraid. The shapings do things to the forest paths. Look here, do you want me to accompany you?"

"It might be helpful, but aren't you busy?"

"Well, rather. I'm just on the edge of setting a new record. But for a friend of old Jib's—"

"Oh, I wouldn't think of bothering you, then. What do you mean by *the* forest?"

"There are forests and forests. This is *the* forest. Cheerio, then."

He shook hands, and turned to thumping at the sand again. Jib squatted down with his book on his knees, and began to go through the motions of writing, oblivious of the fact that he had left both the inkless pen and his paper behind.

VI.

The path took a slight downward slope, and the hedges opened out to reveal a new and monotonous succession of flowerbeds.

There were long shadows across the path that hinted of a setting moon. Barber was reminded that he had been walking all night without food. When Oberon's royal chamberlain had handed him one of the ever-filled food bags carried by Fairyland travelers, it was with the warning that he had better use it before sunrise. A single shaft of sunlight striking the thing was apt to cause a kind of minor shaping.

He brushed the crumbs from his lap and stood up. The shadows had lengthened and run together as he ate, the moon was a cookie with a piece bitten out, at the very edge of the horizon. There was still no sign of the sun that had driven away the previous night's moon; perhaps even the ephemerides of Fairyland did not run on schedule. In the weakened light the path was harder to trace. He strained forward to follow it—and was swallowed in a dark as intense as though he had suddenly gone blind. Better rest up. He trotted over to the nearest hedge, felt his way under its spread on the cushiony grass.

When he woke it was to find the sun already low, the moon up and challenging it. A few minutes brought him to a fork which must be the one Cyril had mentioned. Go left, he had said, since the day was Monday; a piece of reasoning which struck Barber as so characteristic of the place that he stood for a moment wondering whether it was still Monday and if not, which was the right direction. Finally deciding Cyril would have made allowance for the lapse in time, he took the left fork. The way led down and around a long curve; climbed a steepish rise, and brought him out on the crest of a low hill, with a broad meadow between him and a dark wall of midnight green—*the* forest, so denominated. The sun was down behind it.

Fred Barber took a long breath and marched resolutely across the meadow into the encroaching gloom

under the branches. He could feel the gentle strain at the back of his jacket where the little bulges that must really be wings pulled against it, and there seemed to be a new set of muscles developing at his chest.

The forest was one of large trees, old as time, with neither grass nor underbrush around their trunks. It would be like the tame parked forests of Germany, Barber thought, but for the bulging of knots and scars, which in the tricky moonlight gave almost every tree some semblance of a human face. A scowling eye greeted him from the gloom ahead, a mournfully drooping mouth followed him there.

OVERHEAD spots of sky were scattered beyond the leaves, but walking was not too difficult on the even leaf mold. Barber peered here and there for denizens of the place to guide him. There were none, no more sound nor motion about than there had been in the park beyond Oberon's palace. The place was in a kind of silent green golden age as though the trees themselves had absorbed all the personality of the landscape. He struggled with the thought that they might similarly absorb him, turning his body into one of those rugose pillars, his members into branches— It was as credible as anything else in this land of unreason.

He was trying to follow a straight line by sighting on trees before and behind him, but could not be sure against following a wide circle.

Something moved.

In his familiar old world it would be an animal and perhaps dangerous. Still, Titania's wand ought to defend him against wu-wugs, whether predacious or fawning. He was acquiring respect for that ivory stick since the incident of the cloudless rain. He took a long, leaping step forward. The figure moved again, and now he was sure of its humanity.

"Hey!" he called.

The figure stopped; an old woman, leaning on a stick gripped in skinny hands, her long nose and chin curving toward each other like those of a caricature. Only these were visible under a floppy hat, and her head was bent to stare at the ground.

Barber bowed. "Beg pardon, ma'am, but could you tell me the way to the Kobold Hills?"

The head did not lift. " 'Tis bad loock to sleep near an apple tree. And beware o' t' ploom," said a voice that was so like Mrs. Gurton's as to make him start.

"Thank you," he said, "but can you tell me how to get to—"

" 'Tis bad loock to sleep near t' apple. And watch aht foor t' ploom." She showed him a shoulder and toddled off among the dark trunks.

Barber hesitated. If she didn't want to tell him, he had no means of compulsion, unless the wand— But at least she was going somewhere, not round and round as he feared he himself was. He whirled and started after, but she had moved with surprising speed, and was now no more than a flicker of motion far down the glades, held for a moment in a moonbeam, then gone completely.

No use. He groped his way back to the space where he had met the hag—or thought perhaps he had found it. Surely that oak whose boles had twisted themselves into the face of a villainous bishop was one he had seen before. Damn! The thought occurred to Barber that if he acted on Fairyland precedent, he would probably be performing his mission by helping Jib write a commentary. It caused him to smile till a twig snapped somewhere in the moon-blue gloom and fear ran up and down his spine on little cold feet.

SOMETHING there, moving with him, parallel. No, it was not just the twig, he told himself, realizing that the small sound had been closer than the presence he suspected. The snap had called his attention to that presence, roused him from his own unawareness. It was there. Perhaps imagination? No, an almost imperceptible rustling, moving when he moved, stopping with him. No—imagination; nothing could synchronize its movements so exquisitely to his own. No, not imagination; that co-ordination could be achieved in this mad Fairyland where the physical laws in which he had been brought up didn't hold water.

"—didn't hold water," he caught himself saying the words aloud. This would never do; he was letting it get him. Ahead there was a little cleared space, with moonbeams slanting down across it. He raced for it, reached the edge, and stood gasping for his equilibrium; then jumped a foot, as a figure moved at the far side. It was clad in flowing garments and took a step toward him. He clutched the wand in both hands, as if it were a bat.

"Why, you're frightened!" trilled a soprano voice that ended in two notes of a laugh. "Don't fear me, mortal. I heard you in *the* forest, far away, and came to help you. Are you lost?"

Barber's muscles relaxed and he let the stick down as she came toward him, her face shadowed by a chaplet of leaves. "Yes, I am," he confessed. "I'm trying to get to the Kobold Hills. Perhaps you can help me find the way?"

Again the lilt of laughter. "But surely! Ah, none without the pure fairy blood can find their way without help through *the* forest. Come."

She had reached his side and taken his hand in her own, small and cool. The fear-feet were dancing on his spine still, but light as thistledown; there was something thrilling and pleasant in the frank contact of her hand; she led the way under the dark trees so straight and sure. He half stumbled across a root and came against her with shoulder and hip.

"Sorry," said Barber.

Her head turned and in the dark he thought she was smiling at him. "It's all right—how could you know the footways as I do? You're very strong."

"I never thought so," said Barber, practically, and then as this seemed an ungracious response to an obvious conversational lead, added: "It's awfully good of you to—take charge of me like this."

"Not so. We of *the* forest are often lonely. To feel

the pressure of a friendly hand is—sweet." Her fingers gripped his tighter for a part of a second.

She must have a cat's eyes for dark places, she was hurrying him along so fast. He wanted to go on talking to her, explore further this mysterious and rather attractive personage, about whom hung a faint sweet perfume of—what was it? At least, he assured himself with a sudden return to a diplomat's normal caution, he wanted to get her into a light bright enough to make sure she didn't have buck teeth or piano legs.

His guide suddenly swung him around a big tree with a crack-the-whip effect and stood facing him.

"Oh," she said, "here is the very door of my place. Will you not stay and rest for a few moments?" And, as Barber groped for a formula of reluctance that would allow him to change his mind and accept with the least urging, she added: "If not for your own sake, at least for mine. I'm suddenly so tired."

An alarm bell rang in his head. That was a lie. She was not in the least tired. But Fred Barber was utterly lost now in this immense wood, and if she were lying to him, it was also likely that she had taken him far from his direction. He could only string along and find out.

"Why, I don't know—" he said, "I really must be making progress—"

"Ah, I understand." Her head lowered and she let his hand fall. "It's but a poor woods thing, and you used to great courts—" The fluting voice trailed off with an accent at the edge of tears.

"Oh, no; I was just going to say that I must be making progress, but I've already made about enough for tonight, so I can stop for a few minutes."

She took his hand again and led for half a dozen steps. A deeper black that would be a bank loomed out of the dimness ahead; his guide stooped and pulled aside a curtain of leaves. Warm fingers of yellow light reached from a short tunnel at whose far end Barber could see a room. He ducked through the door and followed her. At the far end she turned, laughing, and took both his hands in hers.

Neither buck teeth nor piano legs, but a good, if somewhat well-developed figure, clad in a sheer dress splotched batik-wise in red, yellow, green, with a massive jeweled belt clasped around the waist. A blond head, cheeks cosmetic-red, though he could swear not from cosmetics, and eyes of a pronounced and startling green. Nice features, full lips; Barber smiled approval.

Her eyes widened in response, a little smile played across her lips as she drew his hands around till they met at her back. Her fingers slid up his arms till they reached his shoulders, where they clung with a tingling pressure and her head tipped back. "We in the wood are so lonely—so lonely," she sighed into his lips after the first contact. "Oh—you're strong. I didn't know a mortal could be so strong." Her eyelids fluttered against his throat; the perfume of her hair was intoxicating.

Was there something a trifle too rapid in this approach? The girl sighed and pulled his head down to meet her lips again.

Fred Barber said: "I really ought to know your name."

"I have no name, my love."

The alarm bell rang again, loud and clear, this time. She was lying. But why? And what did it matter, with this fascinating vision pirouetting slowly between him and the light. Barber remembered that there had been occasions when he threw a shoe at the alarm clock. Unfortunately, he also remembered there were usually consequences when he did it, and briefly cursed a temperament that could not take the moment without question. She slid into his arms again.

"No, really, what do people call you?"

"You may call me Malacea. Ah, love—"

Another bell jangled with a different timbre, far back in memory. The name ought to mean something, but he could not think what. He talked desperately between long kisses. "How do you live? I mean, do you stay here always."

"You will see. You'll stay with me— We can be so happy, we two alone."

She's lying.

"Are you all by yourself?"

"Until you came." *That's a lie.* "But now we'll be together—forever." *That's another.* She tilted her head back. Again it came between him and the light, a curious light that flowed without visible source from a little bowl of bark. Barber noted with a nervous shock that his hostess was ever so slightly transparent. There was something wrong—very wrong. He pulled away suddenly and sat down on the bed, which was of moss and let him sink into it. Think fast, Barber!

"Listen, sweetheart," he said, reaching for her hand and holding it tight, "let's do this right. They warned me that all sorts of terrible things would happen to me if I didn't hurry up this mission I'm on, and I believe them. Can't you come with me as far as the Kobold Hills? It won't take long, and then we can both come back here. I like your woods."

Her eyes twitched. Little lines appeared around her mouth, making her expression not half so attractive. "Oh, stay," she said, with a throaty sob in her voice. But Barber noted that the fingers of her other hand, resting against the wooden door pillar, were tap-tapping an irregular telegraphic beat, and her head cocked as though to hear an expected sound.

"How can I? You wouldn't want me to—turn into a frog in your arms."

Tap-tap—and then, a duller sound, something approaching the cave with slow, heavy tread.

Malacea wrenched her hand free, snatched up Barber's wand, and raced down the tunnel.

He sprang to his feet and after, plunging through the leaf curtain with a rustle. For a moment he hung there, utterly blinded by the change from lighted room to tree shadow where only a few drops of moonlight filtered through. Out of that dark came the girl's voice:

"No—no. Please! You have the wand—that's all you need—ooh!"

The girl, just visible ahead of him, stumbled and fell as though strongly pushed. Between them moved a shadow, whose opposite side was outlined by a shaft of moon to the likeness of a leafless branch, shaped like a huge, gnarled hand. It was coming toward him.

Barber ducked, dodged behind a tree, and looked up. Above him towered a figure, human in form but with a barklike surface, twice his own size, semitransparent where it got between him and the moon. It's eyes held a dead fire of hate and cruelty, and the scraggy arms were reaching for him.

He turned and ran as he had never run in his life, dodging like a deer among the moon-splotched trunks. A root tripped him; he took three sprawling steps, recovered and went on; almost lost his footing over a small depression. Behind him, getting no nearer but certainly not receding, he heard the swish and crackle of the ogre's pursuit.

He slipped around one tree and was caught across the head by a low-hung branch, hard enough to bring a blinding flash across his vision. He kept on, feeling rather than seeing his way till sight cleared.

Another staggering trip must have cost him yards of the small lead he held over the monster, and a trick of position threw the shadow of that clutching hand across a broad slash of moonlight before him. He could feel the wing stumps quiver with instinct on his back; useless—and his second wind was going.

Racing on, he risked a sidelong glance. One of the huge hands was almost abreast, its fingers spread. Before him the forest suddenly opened into brilliant light and there was a stream, with flashing rapids right and left. A dark pool loomed before. Fred Barber put his last ounce of strength into a soaring broad jump.

He lost a shoe at the water's edge and fell forward. In a last burst of vitality, he heaved himself to a knee and groped for something with which to defend himself.

The ogre towered from the other bank, looking down with those lidless eyes, its mouth working. The flooding moonlight on the thing cast only the thinnest of shadows through its shapeless carcass. For a few ticks of the watch, man and spook stared at each other across the rippling water. One of Barber's hands found the stone he sought.

The ogre turned and moved off among the trees, *thump-thump* on the leaf mold. Barber could have thrown the stone, but if His Transparency wanted to call the matter quits, Fred Barber was certainly in no mood to pursue the matter further. It was not till the monster had disappeared from sight and sound that he remembered Oberon's words—"brooks—plagued ungainly obstacles to us of the pure blood, who must seek around by their sources or fly high above." That was why the pursuit had been given up. Or perhaps it had not. Perhaps the ogre was on his way now to circle the stream at its headwaters.

Barber staggered dizzily forward. His forehead was growing an imposing bump and ached dreadfully.

He had not taken more than a dozen steps when the pinwheels before his eyes ran together, and he collapsed into a faint. The last thing he remembered before going out was Malacea's perfume. It was apple blossoms.

VII.

His faint must have turned into the normal sleep that Barber's exhausted nerves and muscles craved. He came to himself on his back, staring straight up. The incredible moon was already losing some of its light to a paling sky. Barber felt hungry, sore, and abused. The ground, oozy damp beneath, had left a trail of discomfort along his spine, and his head ached vilely, but he felt better.

The fact was, Barber told himself, lying there staring at the intaglioed surface of Earth's sister star, and not caring to move lest it make the headache twinges worse—the fact was that being hunted through the woods by a translucent ogre out of a nightmare was a useful experience. It restored one's confidence in the reality of objective existence. Also in the ability of the corporeal senses to bear true witness of that existence, however their testimony might disaccord with preconceived notions of what it ought to be.

No, it was real enough, and he did not doubt that if the ogre's woody fingers had closed about him they would have been real enough, too. So was the pressure of Malacea against him as he kissed her, though she was semitransparent. Well, the forest hag had warned him against the apple—though how could he have known?

At this point his meditations were interrupted by the unmistakable voice of the little snipe, her accent low and urgent:

"Let him wake. Oh, let him wake before the dawn."

Barber sat up and reached for the ache spot on his head. Malacea was facing him across the stream. She leaped to her feet: "Oh, my mortal lover!" she cried. "Come back; I know a spell to cure your pain."

"Yeah?" said Barber with hostility. "I know how you'd do it, too—turn me over to that Dracula boy friend of yours and have him fix me up so I wouldn't have to worry about pains any more."

The light, whether of moon or coming day, was bright enough to show two big tears coming out on her cheek. "Ah, never, I swear it. My heart rose when you escaped the clutches of that demon Plum."

"That demon *what?*"

"Plum. I dare not but do as he asks. All the plums are hard and evil, but this one worst. His heart has dried and he wants a mortal blood transfusion."

"And you help him get it. Is that the idea?" Barber's voice was implacable.

"Oh—" Her fingers twisted against each other. "How can I make myself clean before you? How could I know that among the mortals that come to this wood would be my own dear love? Oh, come back, and help me repent; I'll make it good to you!"

Barber, hunting among the long grasses for his dropped shoe, cocked an inward ear toward the alarm bell of his instinct for lies. Not a tinkle. She really meant it; or perhaps that new sixth sense merely did not work on emotional matters. "Thanks," he said, "but I'll stay over here out of reach of your friend. What happened to my wand?"

"You need not fear him. Listen, I'll prove my faith by giving you his secret. Wait for the sun; when daylight's abroad he cannot stir from his tree. You have only to eat of his fruit, then he can never harm you after. A hundred and fifty paces upstream will bring you to where the tree can be seen; it has a broken top."

"Unh." Barber found the shoe and put it on. It was wet. "Good. I'll wait till daylight and then try it."

"But come to me now. Oh, hurry!" She looked up at the sky, now fully rose-colored along the horizon. "It's growing daybreak, and I must go back to my own tree."

"What became of my wand?" repeated Barber.

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

She was weeping openly now. Barber, who had seen enough both of night club life and diplomacy to develop some cynicism about feminine tears, flicked dried mud off his clothes without looking at her. Malacea stamped her foot: "The plum took it; where, I do not know. So you have my full confession; won't you—"

"No, I won't," said Barber. It seemed to him that his new sense of truth or no-truth was confused. Possibly Malacea suspected but did not definitely know where the wand was. He found a fallen trunk, tested it for solidity, sat down, and opened the provision bag. Everything all right there, so far. Between bites, he said: "If you really want to impress me, you might tell me how to get to the Kobold Hills."

"Go straight on. Beyond the wood, you will reach a plain; walk through it for an hour or two, and when you see the hills blue on the horizon, you are near. But there be devils and strange things in that plain; I can see to guide you only so far."

Barber frowned, but there was no indication of anything but truth in her words. Watching him narrowly from beyond the stream, she suddenly became all gaiety.

"Oh, you'll return; I see it now. I am your fate and you mine. We are all, all avatars, though you are mortal and I only a tree sprite who can be seen through when the light is strong. Farewell then, for a little time."

"Good-by." He was beginning to relent a little; after all, she had been decent as far as she knew how.

"No, not good-by. We'll meet again and strangely." The tinkling laugh, that had accompanied her first words when they met, ran three notes up a scale and two down. "And you, mortal, will live weirdly before you lose yourself in finding yourself."

She took three steps among the crowding trees and was hidden, but behind her for a moment there floated the words of a song:

"—fairies turn to men;
When he touches the three—"

It was cut off abruptly, and the wood went utterly silent as the first level ray of sunlight struck across the rapids in the stream.

Barber, dawdling over the remains of his breakfast, reflected that the downright approach of this child of nature was perhaps more appropriate to certain phases of international relations than to personal ones. There was something peculiar about the personal relations of Fairyland anyway, now that he came to think of it. The winged girl in Oberon's palace, and now this one, had practically thrown themselves at him. He could not honestly flatter himself into believing it was because of any innate attractiveness of his own.

There were also Jib and Cyril, both busy, who had been willing to enough to drop their concerns and help him when he asked in the right way. It was as though Fairyland psychological reaction worked like a slot machine; you dropped in a penny, and unless it were counterfeit, got a stick of gum. No, not quite. There seemed to be some choice of reaction. He remembered Titania catching herself midway in a reply to one of Oberon's taunts, and the latter's abrupt shift to meet her mood—Malacea's lightning change from tears to happiness. It was more like a game of chess; you played pawn to king four on the board of personal relations, and your opposite number, though not compelled to imitate you exactly, had to make one of a series of standard moves or find himself compromised.

If this held true as a general rule—hold the boat, Malacea had just offered him a chance to give check to the king. Eat some of the dry-hearted plum's fruit, and

then be damned to him. He would need any such protections he could get after having lost Titania's wand, for he did not in the least doubt that queenly lady's word about his coming to "misadventured piteous overthrow" as a result. Action!

The plum tree was there, all right, standing pretty much by itself, as though none of the neighboring foliage cared to approach the monster. It was a very seedy old tree, indeed, with pink blotches of fungus on its straggling leaves.

Barber waded the stream and approached it cautiously, ready to bolt. It took some inspection to reveal any fruit at all on it, but he finally located a couple—flat, wrinkly things, but plums. There was no sign of the wand. He wondered if the plum were hollow and the wand inside. It would be interesting to investigate; for that matter, it would be interesting to chop down the tree itself. That ought to settle Mr. Plum-Spook's hash. But he had no ax, not even a knife; no matches to experiment with burning the thing down, and was not enough of a boy scout to start a fire by rubbing sticks.

The plums were well out of reach. A cast among the other trees gave him a dead branch, but it was not long enough. Two or three efforts to cast it javelin-wise gave no result.

Barber dropped the branch, wiped his hands, gripped the trunk of the plum and started to climb. The bark seemed to crawl beneath his hands—imagination probably. About him the malformed leaves rustled and the big old trunk heaved ever so slightly, as though in the grip of a storm-wind. It creaked till he wondered whether it would break beneath him.

The branch with the fruit was one of the uppermost, and when he reached it Barber was driven to the uncomfortable expedient of swinging out along it, hand after hand, with his toes just balancing him on a lighter branch beneath. Under his weight the upper branch curved till he had difficulty keeping his grip. Toward the end, he let go with one hand and grabbed. The fruit floated irritatingly away from his fingers, but at the fourth snatch he made it and tucked the plum in his jacket. Another effort gave him a second, and he dropped to the ground.

Close up the plum looked even more unappetizing than from a distance, and a tentative nibble assured him that it tasted even worse—like a sour dried prune. No two ways about it, though; when you have to—

Cr-rrack! He looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of a big dead branch, unaccountably broken loose from the tree's morbid top, hurtling down at him. He jumped like a grasshopper, and sought the shelter of a friendly-looking oak to finish his unpleasant snack. As he ate, he noted that the back of his jacket seemed tighter. Perhaps the wings were growing; but if so they were no use to him yet, so he set out to trudge along the banks of the stream.

THE forest was very quiet in the dawn light, almost as quiet as the strange park land through which he had passed before. He moved on without incident for a couple of hours till the trees on the left bank began to thin. Among their trunks he could see a line of yellow-brown where they stopped altogether. He crossed and made toward it. But when he got nearer he perceived that what he had taken for the packed earth of a plain was in fact a low, brown wall of some kind of adobe. It inclosed a large space filled with rank on rank of gravestones, all alike in size except one very large one which faced a kind of gate a hundred yards from him.

Barber found the sight surprising; he had always supposed the inhabitants of Fairyland to be immortal, or nearly so. The wall was only knee-high. He hopped over it and went to investigate this curious cemetery, in which the ground was not humped as it would be over real graves. The stones were very old; all the inscriptions had been weathered from them except a letter here and there. To make matters worse the first two he examined had been lettered in Greek. From the next the lettering had disappeared entirely; there was only just visible the incised outline of a violin and a pair of musical notes. The next bore a book open, with the letters VERI—a gap, and AS. Then came one that had a crude representation of a telescope, another with faded armorial bearings, and one with a mortarboard academic cap. All had some symbol, and as Barber wandered among them, he was struck by the fact that none of these symbols were either military or religious in character.

He made his way toward the larger and more elaborate stone at the gate. Like the rest, it had been nearly effaced; unlike them it still bore a few traces of lettering beneath a coat of arms now nearly wiped out. Peering close, Barber was able to make out in the crumbling stone:

When the redbeard comes again
Then shal . . . urn . . .
When he . . . . . lac . .
He sh . . . . . faces.

The illegibility of it was made still greater by the fact that it had originally been carved in an old letter like the type face of a German book. Barber puzzled over it for a while, but could make nothing of it. Nor did there seem to be any other sign of life but a couple of lizards sunning themselves on the inclosure wall, so he left the graveyard and continued his way.

BEYOND, the trees really were thinning out along the left bank of the stream. "Go straight on," Malacca had said, which he took to mean on along the river. It divided and flung one brooklike branch back among the trees, so he kept to the other. Along this fork the country was flat and soon became dismally bare, with the trees petering out into gray-green shrubs that had a greasy look under the now-high sun. Once or twice Barber caught a glimpse of something moving on the horizon, but too far and indistinctly for any details to be made out. The stream dropped away from him, down to the bottom of a stony arroyo, where it finally disappeared altogether.

It was hot. Barber called upon his food bag for

flasks of water, not without some trepidation, for in this shadeless region it had been impossible to keep the sun away from it. His respect for the frenetic little king's ability rose as the bag unfailingly answered his desires. But when he tried the container for cold bottled beer, he got only a bitter liquid that made him quickly return to water.

But he was making progress. Looking back, he saw a dark line of green rimming the horizon—*the* forest. In spite of his hard night, he felt strong and full of energy.

He plodded resolutely on. The dust-green shrubs had now mostly gone. The ground was all sand and pebbles with bunches of coarse grass here and there, across which he steered by the sun. The loneliness and silence of the landscape was beginning to weigh on him. Even the presence of the too-affectionate apple sprite would have been a relief, he decided, and began to wonder unhappily about what happened to people lost in deserts.

Miles of nothing.

Suppose he had been misdirected or had lost his way? Suppose he were isolated for keeps in this ironing board of a landscape? Oberon's bag would keep him in food and water, perhaps indefinitely, perhaps only to the next shaping, while he walked, walked, walked. Forever was a long time.

His beard would grow long and— Whoa, there was a possibility of escape. His wings, those absurd shoulder-blade bunches, would grow, too. He craned his neck around to look over his shoulder. There was certainly some kind of projection present, swelling his jacket to hunchback proportions. He tried using the new muscles at his chest, and could just see the projections wiggle. Interesting. He wondered if, when the wings came out, the ability to use them would grow too, or whether he would have to be pushed off a high place to learn how, like an eaglet from its nest. Who would catch him if he fell?

Consideration of the question diverted him till he noticed that his shadow had lengthened across the featureless plain and the sun was setting. Evidently he was to be caught out there for the night. Malacea had said it was only a walk of an hour or two—something wrong somewhere. He hoped it was only that she was a tree sprite and could not know this desert, but all the same the fear of this eternal emptiness came back and sat at the edge of his mind, waiting to be invited into the center.

There was no help for it at this moment. For better or worse, he was stuck for the night. He sat down where he was, waited till the red ball of fire dipped under the horizon, and then fished in the food bag. Unlike the forest night, this one was brilliant with stars, though Barber, looking aloft, could recognize none of the constellations.

Since there was nothing else to do, he scratched hip and shoulder holes in the sand and went to sleep.

The sun woke him by hitting him squarely in the eye. He stood up, stiff from his comfortless bed and looked around. There was a line of hills, rimming the distance in plain sight, and they could only be the Kobold Hills, his goal at last. He gave a shout of delight which was lost in the immense silence; requisitioned a flask of water from the bag, and started briskly toward the hills.

VIII.

Long before the hills were high about him, Barber was conscious of their clamor on that still air. The rhythm was set by an insistent metallic beat, up and down the scale like a set of tuned tympani, so near waltz time that he found himself thinking "The Blue Danube" to it. But as the sounds drew nearer and louder a melody joined the resonance; a chorus of many male voices from tenor to bass, singing indistinguishable words. The air was now gay, now melancholy, but always in the same fascinating three-quarter beat; for a bar or two Barber would catch the hint of something familiar in it.

Around him the ground was soaring into steeps and declivities; the soapy green shrubs of the desert had given place to oak, birch and pine. Definitely among the hills now, he turned to walk forward in a more normal fashion, and was relieved to find the landscape had ended its antics. But the ceaseless song and drumming now changed direction, coming from one side and then the other. As he opened out a thickly wooded draw a great burst of the music came charging down at him; among the trees in that direction were freshly cut stumps, and high up in the side of the hill a glare of warm red light challenged the dying sun among the branches.

An entrance of some kind—should he chance it? He hesitated for a moment, then decided against it. After all, he could return; there was not the vaguest hint of a plan in his mind. He pressed on, noting that along here the ground was seamed with little paths, crisscrossing among the trees, pale in the fading gloom.

As he stood looking at it the thought came to him that one of the most striking things about Fairyland was its sameness. There was no escaping an experience; whatever one did, whichever way one turned, it was repeated until a solution had been found. Like the case of Three-eyes on the road here. Wondering whether he had solved the problem of Malacea satisfactorily, he turned toward the entrance and began to climb.

Just before his head came level with it, a new note, high and piping, joined the roaring melody of the chorus. It was a bird song, a nightjar, perfect in time and melody, and Barber recognized the tune as that of the "Waldweben" from "Siegfried."

Ominous. But no use turning back now. He drew a breath, heaved himself across the rubble heap and stepped into a short passage, with a smooth-polished stone floor, slanting slightly down into a great hall whose upper reaches were lost in smoky dimness. It was filled with tables and lined with guttering red torches in brackets.

Every seat at all those tables was occupied by a little

man, but there was no type resemblance—some clean-shaven with round, jolly cherubic faces, some skinny with goat beards, some with jowls and pointed mustaches. They had mugs of beer before them, and barmaids in bright dresses were hurrying among the tables with more. As Barber watched, a fat elf pinched one of the girls. She jumped, tripped and came down with a crash; one of the dwarves at the nearest table emptied his beer mug on her head. Those nearby burst into roars of laughter, clinging to each other's shoulders, helpless with merriment.

The incident passed unnoticed in the general uproar, for the singing that Barber had heard during his approach was now clear as coming from the throats of these drinkers, who were pounding out the time with their mugs. But it was not quite the joyous concord he had heard from a distance. Every little group of kobolds and sometimes every kobold in a group was working away on a different song, flatting hideously. Only the metallic waltz beat of the drumming, louder now, lay under and united the clashing sounds.

Barber was granted time to observe this much before the kobolds at the nearest table saw him. They stopped singing and stared at him with slack jaws, whispering and pointing, drawing more after them till silence spread across the room like ripples on a pool. It had nearly reached the far end, where the doors through which the barmaids came were barely visible, when three kobolds, neatly uniformed in gray, came hurrying toward him. The leader wore a badge in complicated gold filigree. He bowed low before Barber, and said:

"Good evening, highborn sir. It is my pleasure to extend you the welcome of the Kobold Caverns. How intelligent of you to come and see the wonders of our beautiful place with your own eyes! May I hope you will be with us for a long time? Will you permit me to join you in a glass of beer?"

The last words came out loud in an enormous silence punctuated only by the waltz drumming. Barber knew what it was now; it was the sound of hammers.

"Why, I wouldn't mind some beer, thanks," he said. "But what I really want is to see whoever's in charge here. I'm an ambassador from King Oberon, and—"

A vertical frown leaped into being between the gray dwarf's eyebrows. "Excuse, please," he said, and turning to the room, threw up his arm. "Go on," he shouted, "this does not concern you." All over the room faces turned back to the tables and the uproar of song instantly began again in full volume. Gold Badge turned back to Barber.

"Ah," he sighed, "Observe how cheerful the dear fellows are. Only the industrious can be so truly happy. Is that not the answer to the slanders that are pronounced against us? Will you come this way, please?"

He gripped Barber's arm and steered him down an aisle between two tables of shouting kobolds, with the other two guides coming along behind. "I trust you enjoyed your journey, highborn sir?" He glanced at Barber's shoulders, then sighed again, "Ah, but you winged fairies are fortunate—born in a different world, so to speak. All we poor kobolds obtain, we must earn by the sweat of our brows."

Barber thought of his trip through the desert and smiled internally. "You seem to have made yourselves very comfortable here, though," he said courteously. It would not do to push matters about the swords.

"We do our best. All we ask is peace in which to carry on our honest labors." He swung Barber around at a table in a recess where five bearded kobolds were trying to sing a part-song but missing badly because none of them seemed able to remember when he should come in. "Here we are. You can go." He motioned to the occupants of the table. Two of them stood up docilely enough, but the one at the back brought his beer mug down with a bang.

"This is organized inefficiency!" he bawled. "I'll make a report to the section! I'll—"

He came to a mouth-open stop as Barber's guide stepped forward, fingering the filigree badge; then leaped to his feet, bowing and knuckling his forehead. "I beg your humble pardon, worshipful sir. I did not know you were authorized. I—"

"Next time it will be the White Pit," said Gold Badge evenly. "Please be seated, highborn sir, and try our kobold beer. Drink—and die, you know; don't drink—and die anyway. Therefore, let's drink. Ha, ha, ha."

"Ha, ha, ha," clacked his two companions in obedient chorus. A mug of beer was thrust into Barber's hand. It was delicious, somewhat with the flavor of bock, but had a tang that gave warning of a particularly heady brew.

"Are you not partly of mortal kindred, highborn sir?" inquired Gold Badge. "I thought so; something about the eyes. You will enjoy seeing our mushroom plantations. Krey here can show you all through them. He used to be a deputy in the Providience Section."

"Till the medical discovered I had a natural affinity for beer," said one of the grayclads. He had a young face and pleasant smile over a jaw heavy enough to be cast iron.

"I'd like very much to see them sometime," said Barber, "but just at present I'm here on really important business—"

"Oh, business!" All three burst into a gale of laughter, which the two assistants ended by sputtering into their beer, while Gold Badge laid a hand on Barber's arm. "Pardon us, highborn sir, but it is not permitted to discuss business at this hour in the Kobold Caverns."

That beer was heady; Barber could feel a spot of warmth on each cheekbone. But he was not so far gone as to miss the fact that this was a particularly elaborate version of the run-around. He grinned to show appreciation of a joke on himself, and pushed ahead: "You'll have to excuse me. I don't know your local customs. But I'm an ambassador and by international custom have the right of transacting business at any time."

"So?" Gold Badge's eyes narrowed a trifle. "I did not really understand, highborn sir. It is most fortunate

that we have met; for in addition to being of the Incoming Section which receives guests, I am also of the Welcoming Section to greet ambassadors. Doubtless you have special credentials to prove your character—our lady Titania's wand, or His Radiance's ring, or even a mere warrant in writing?"

"I did have but I—" Shame flooded Barber at the memory of how he had lost the wand and he came to a halt. The triple laughter blended into the sound of the ceaseless waltz song, and Gold Badge dug him in the ribs:

"Ha, ha, ha! Never mind, *Mr.* Ambassador, we won't give you away. We take things easy in the Kobold Caverns and the drinks are on the government. Finish that one and have another."

Barber drank.

At one point in the subsequent proceedings he caught himself trying to explain the Binomial Theorem, of which he knew rather less than his audience, to a group that seemed passionately interested. At another he was leading them in a vigorous rendition of "The Bastard King of England." Then Gold Badge seemed somehow to have slipped away, the hall and chorus were gone, and he was descending a long, dim passage with Krey and the other gray-clad receptionist; a passage where the only sound was the three-quarter beat of the forges.

The passage slanted in involuted curves under a ceiling just tall enough to give him head room. Torches smoked on the walls here and there, dripping an occasional spark, and where their light fell strongest the wall was perspiring in big, dank drops. The black mouths of other tunnelings yawned to right and left at each turn; there were no lights in them.

"—our mountain mushrooms, cooked in a butter of beechnuts," Krey was saying. "I have *mush room* in my stomach for them. Ha, ha, ha."

"Ha, ha, hahaha," the passage echoed sepulchrally. At each branching tunnel the sound of the hammer beats was louder and clearer. When they reached the next turn-and-entrance Barber pretended to stagger, and a little illogically vexed at finding how easy it was to let himself go, clutched vainly at the smooth wall, slid and lay with his head half in the side tunnel. The hammer blows drowned Krey's footsteps—he had on some kind of soft shoes—but Barber's ear caught the accent of his voice and the note of a retreating laugh. *Bumpity-bump, bump-bump, bump-bump* went the hammers to the sound of a mentally hummed "Blue Danube"; and the floor was cold stone, but an enormous alcoholic weariness invaded Barber's limbs and it was suddenly pleasant to lie right there.

"Mus' get up," he told himself fuzzily, but only managed to twitch a leg while half his brain cried a warning to a too-well-satisfied other half.

Clang! Somebody dropped something. The eldritch idea assailed Barber that the sound represented the fall of Krey's face when that strong-chinned worthy discovered his disappearance. Laughter released his paralysis; chuckling over the inane drunken humor of the idea, he pulled himself to knees, then feet. The side passage was as black as the inside of a dog, sloping down rather steeply, and he had to keep one hand on the wall for support as well as direction. But fifty or a hundred yards on it turned suddenly and he found himself at the head of a flight of low steps, looking down into a wide cavern. There was a torch in the wall near him; it showed a shapeless mound of something occupying the whole center of the cave, covered over with a cloth. Right at the head of the stairs a small iron bar was set across the passage about two feet up. The latter puzzled him till he remembered that the kobolds were the only people of Fairyland who could touch iron. The bar would be good as a locked door to anyone but himself, but he stepped over it and down the stairs.

The cloth was loose. He lifted one edge and gave a whistle, for there they were: rapiers, sabers, claymores, panzerstechers, yataghans, cutlasses, and dozens of other kinds of swords whose names he did not even know, each kind in its own bundle and thousands of them altogether. This was what the kobolds were trying to hide from him all right, but what could he—

"So."

The tone was even, but nasty. Barber, a cold perspiration of sudden sobriety making a little spot between his shoulder blades, turned and looked into the eyes of Krey. The pleasant smile was gone; in the second or two that they stood gazing at each other, the kobold fumbled a little silver whistle out of his tunic and blew. Instantly there were shouts and the sound of running feet; another door at the back of the room, which Barber had not noticed, was filled with dwarfish figures.

For a moment the idea of seizing up one of the blades and slashing out among them leaped through Barber's head—but where would he go among those complex tunnels? Krey seemed to follow his thought:

"I advise you not to attempt resistance," he said coldly. Barber noticed that among the crowding kobolds at the back door a disciplined battalion with spears in their hands were pushing forward. The heads of the spears were leaf-shaped and looked extremely sharp. He dropped his hands at his side in a gesture of surrender.

"It is too bad," Krey went on, "that you must spoil a fine evening by abusing the hospitality of the Caverns. Now you must bear the consequences— Take him to the trial room!"

One of the spearmen jabbed Barber in the leg. He jumped and yelped. "Damn it! I didn't ask for your hospitality and I don't think very much of it. I'm here as an ambassador and I claim diplomatic immunity."

"Diplomatic immunity confers no license to break the criminal laws." Krey turned his back; the guards closed around Barber, and with lowered spear points, shepherded him toward the back door of the room. There was a passage with torches; it branched, and Barber was urged down the fork to the right, along a ramp and through an arch.

He was in a long and high cavern from whose walls and ceiling projected elaborate carved wood dingleberries in the most atrocious taste. At the far end a kobold with a long nose and prick ears was seated before a table on a low dais, writing feverishly and surrounded by a perfect mountain of papers. The way to his seat was lined by a double row of kobold guards with swords in their hands, standing rigidly and staring at each other. Barber was urged down the alley between them to the foot of the dais, and one of the spearmen let the butt of his weapon drop to the floor with a thump.

The long-nosed kobold looked up with a sour expression. "Guard Section 11. Prisoner found spying in arsenal room. Authorization of Krey, Incoming Section 4," said the spearman, in the metallic voice of an old-fashioned phonograph.

"Look here," Barber burst in, "you're going to have some trouble about this. I'm a perfectly legal ambassador from King Oberon and—"

Long-nose took a new sheet of paper and scribbled. "Your protest is noted and rejected," he cut in. "All residents of the Kobold Caverns, whether metic or natural, are subject to the same restrictions. I sentence you to—"

"But I'm not a resident!" cried Barber desperately. He could see two of the sword bearers start toward him, and the thought of what the sentence might be gave him cold shivers. "I'm not even a resident of Fairyland. I'm a mortal."

Long-nose's brows elevated. "A mortal! Just a moment, please, I must find a precedent. Though I warn you it will not be so pleasant for you, since you have now added perjury to the other charge. Mortals do not have wings." He turned to one of the mounds of papers which reached desk-high from the floor, and began shuffling through them. They had not been disturbed for a long time, apparently, for a little cloud of dust rose from them. Long-nose's face worked convulsively, his head went back, and he emitted a thundering sneeze.

"God bless you," said Barber automatically.

"YEEEEE!" All the kobolds together joined in the ear-piercing shriek. The spearmen dropped their spears, the swordsmen their swords, the long-nosed judge jumped over the table, and all together they raced for the exits. In two minutes Barber was left alone with the discarded weapons, the mound of papers, and the gingerbread carving.

IX.

Barber picked up a few of the swords. Oberon had certainly told him not to use force on the kobolds, and it seemed that other methods were more effective—why hadn't he remembered from the beginning that medieval legend always mentioned the name of God as anathema to these people of the hills? Still, one of these swords would be a handy object if he encountered the plum or other monsters of that ilk. Most of the weapons were too small, but he found a claymore which, being designed for both a kobold's little fists, was about right for one of his own.

Doorways led in several directions among the forest of lambrequins, and the way he had entered by was not promising. He chose an exit at random and found himself in one of the usual passages, which ran on, dipping and winding past rooms dark and rooms lighted. All were untenanted, and Barber was conscious of something vaguely wrong in the air, as impalpable as a thought. He tried to shake it off, tried to hum "Blue Danube"—and then it came to him what the difference was. The undertone of the hammers, no longer so loud, had changed from the three-quarter beat of a waltz to the four-quarter of march time.

The passage also had changed character. Its walls and ceilings were trued off smoothly now, and no longer dripped, so that it was like a corridor in an office building. A few yards ahead the feeble light showed a pair of bronze doors with a complex design in massive relief. Barber put his ear to the doors. Not a sound within. He pushed one of them gently.

Beyond the door was another hall, huge as that of the drinkers, but only feebly lit by a couple of torches. Their flames reflected redly on bright stone of walls and floor; the ceiling was lost in gloom. Barber caught his breath sharply at the sight of what seemed to be human figures in nitches all down the walls. Inspection showed them to be suits of kobold-size Gothic armor, with the visors of the armets down so that it was impossible to tell whether they held living creatures.

He stepped over to the nearest and touched it on the plastron with his sword. It gave forth a metallic scrape rather than the ring of hollowness, but remained immobile. When he tried to lift the visor that mechanism would not budge.

Barber turned toward the far end of the hall. It held

a long, low table, with a row of chairs down one side. At the end was a much larger chair, with a low seat but a high, intricately carved back and damask upholstery. It looked like a throne.

Barber walked the length of the hall to examine this throne more closely. There was nothing special about it, but let into the wall behind it was a copper plate with lettering on it. Barber bent to puzzle out the Gothic inscription:

Of places three
The one you see
Fyrst touched shall bee.

Meaningless. Or perhaps not quite. He remembered a line of Malacea's song:

"When he touches the three places—" Perhaps he was supposed to touch this one. Just for the hell of it, he reached out and touched the plate with the point of his sword.

Crash!

The room stood out vivid in a blue-white flash of lightning, then pitched into darkness while thunder rumbled to and fro among the caverns like ten thousand cannon balls rolling downstairs. Barber froze while the thunder died, straining his eyes against the black. Every hair follicle on his face tingled till his jaw seemed on fire, and he felt a sudden tug at the back of his jacket where the wing cases were.

The room slowly returned to normal, the fiery pinwheels before his eyes disappearing. He looked round. He could swear that the halberd in the hand of that suit of armor swayed. The torches were guttering out, darkness creeping from above like a spider lowering itself on its thread. He heard a faint, fricative sound, that might be breath whistling in and out through the holes of a visor, and realized with a shock that the hammer sounds in the distance had gone altogether dumb.

There was a faint scrape of metal on steel plate and then, small but startling in the silence, the sound of a cough. Barber turned and trotted on tiptoe down the length of that shiny expanse of stone. The end seemed twice as distant as before, like the vanishing point in a diagram showing the laws of perspective. Before he reached it he was frankly running. At the last moment the torches gave a final flicker and went out together. He made the last few strides in darkness, located a door handle by feel and tugged it open, with a sense of wild relief.

No more than before did he have any idea where he was, and now all those passages were more than ever void, with not even the sound of the forges to keep him company. But the luck that had run with him through the caverns still held; after an hour or more of wandering he reached a fork where one passage led to the drab pallor of daylight instead of the ubiquitous torch glow.

The sun had just risen when he came to the mouth, up on a high hillside looking out across a rolling and grassy champaign, quite unlike the desert through which he had trekked to reach the place. Off in the middle distance, half hidden by the intervening rolls, was a group of brown and yellow rectangles that would be a farm or its Fairyland equivalent. Beyond, the darker green of trees.

There would be life of some sort there, and not kobold life. Barber went down the hillside in long, leaping steps, his lungs glad of the fresh air.

It was like a late summer morning in New England with dewy spiderwebs on the grass and a few early midges in their aërial dance above. Grasshoppers sprang out from before his feet, whirred away over the rich meadow.

Barber paused at the lip of the last rise and rubbed his fingers through a considerable growth of whisker. His appearance was certainly odd enough to cause alarm, but there was no razor handy, nor did he feel like dropping the sword.

From the top of the hill he could see the farm spread before him in orderly checkerboards marked off by stone fences. The farmer did not look up till he heard the sound of a displaced stone as Barber climbed over the nearest fence. He was a big, burly man with rolled-up shirt sleeves and a pair of gaudily checked pants sustained by a single gallows at the top, and at the bottom tucked into jack boots. As Barber drew near, he turned a ruddy face in which a pair of startlingly blue eyes looked out over gray-flecked sideburns. His glance fell on the sword; without wasted motion he dropped his hoe, stepped lightly to an angle of the fence, and picked up a formidable-looking broadax. Feet spread, he stood facing Barber without hostility or fear.

"Hello," said Barber.

The farmer replied: "Howdy, mister." He relaxed a little and lowered the ax. "Nice mornin'."

"Yes, it is," agreed Barber judicially. "My name's Barber."

"Glad to make your 'quaintance, Mr. Barber. Mine's Fawcett, Noah Fawcett. Where you from?"

"King Oberon's place."

"Be you one of the heathen?"

"I'm not a fairy, if that's what you mean."

"Don't believe in fairies. They're just heathen. You work for Oberon?"

"Yes. I'm an ambassador."

"Well, I declare to goodness. Where was you from originally?"

Barber smiled. "Lansing, Michigan, if you want to go back that far."

Noah Fawcett frowned. "Don't guess I know . . . say, d'you mean Michigan Territory?"

"It's a State now. Admitted to the Union in 1835."

"Well, by the tarnal nation. Harry Clay allus said we ought to take her in. A real American." Fawcett dropped his ax definitely now and stepped forward to shake hands. "Come on in and make yourself t' hum, mister. How old be you? Be you married? What's your church? Be you Whig or one of those Damocrats? How'd you come to work for Oberon? What's the news from back in the States?"

Barber's movement of desperation halted the spate of inquiry, and Noah Fawcett gave a deep, chesty laugh. "Guess I be jumpin' ahead of the thills, but I ain't see ary man but the swandangled heathen for a right long spell, let alone a real American. Get pretty lonesome for news." He was leading the way to the larger of a pair of clapboarded buildings. Everything had the indescribable lack of sophisticated design Barber had noted in articles made by Continental peasants.

Noah Fawcett caught his glance. "Yep," he said, "Made the hull business, mostly winters when they wan't nathin' else on hand. 'Through the idleness of hands the house droppeth through,' the Good Book says. That rack, now"—he indicated a pair of jigsawed brackets against the wall—"was for a gun. But I never could get a barrel, even from the mountain heathen, and they're pretty cute about ironwork. You can put your sword there. That's a funny hump on your back. Was you hurt when you was little?"

"No. I guess it just grew there."

Fawcett shook his head. "Better be careful of that, Mr. Barber. I had a cousin over to Lou-isy had one of those lumps come on his chest, and the doctor said how he died of it. But I don't put much store by doctors. Now you set down and I shall get some wherewithal to celebrate. Be you married?"

WITHOUT WAITING for Barber's reply he lifted a trapdoor and dived into a cellar, to return in a moment with a jug. "Berry wine," commented Fawcett, pouring some into a pair of wooden mugs with a pleasant glugging sound. "'Tain't's good as the cider I make, but I'm a little mite short-handed, and have to go a long piece for m'apples. How come you to work for the heathen king? Does he pay good wages? He's all right for a heathen, but they're all like Injuns and woodchucks; it wan't do to take ary sass from them. Had a run-in with him myself a while back."

He chuckled at the memory. Barber experienced a sudden twinge of embarrassment at the thought of his own ready acceptance of the authority of the "heathen" court, and was glad he had not mentioned the incipient wings. "How did that happen?" he asked, to keep the conversation on safe lines.

"Passel of plaguey whoop-te-tiddle about some logs. When I come here I made a deal, fair and square, to farm this land and swap my produce. I built me that little sod house you seen outside. Come fall, I went down to the river to get stun, and found a hull batch of apple trees, so I grubbed up some of the littlest and planted 'em round my house. They growed all right, but I had to get rid of 'em."

Fawcett paused dramatically to take a pinch of snuff, and held out the box to Barber, who declined and asked the expected: "Why?"

"The heathen. At night, they'd come dancin' around, wavin' their arms and scowlin' suthin' metaphorical. They was dressed up in bark like they was tryin' to give me a chivaree. We Fawcetts don't scare easy. When I went out to give 'em a piece of my mind they all took after me. I pulled foot back into the house and grabbed my ax. Right there I larnt that must of the heathen is tarnal 'fraid of iron. Some superstition of theirn. Long as I had that ax they wouldn't come nigh me." Fawcett bent to a bootjack. "Pull off your shoes and be comfortable, mister."

Barber was willing enough to do so. The shoes given him by the king's tailor had been comfortable enough in the beginning, but the walking he had done seemed to have spread his feet so much that they were tight; it was a relief to get rid of them. "I thought you said it was something about logs," he said.

"I be comin' to that. They kept comin' around at night. When I asked 'em why they couldn't let a Christian sleep, they told me they was sperrits of the trees. Now I be a moderate man, but it says in hundred and first Psalm, 'He that telleth lies shall not tarry in my sight,' and furthermore, 'Regard not them that have familiar sperrits,' so that got my dander up. I cut down those trees and used the logs to start my little log house that's a corn crib now. Well, I like to had a heathen uprisin' on my hands."

FAWCETT MADE another dramatic caesura, emphasized it by getting up to refill both mugs, and asked with elaborate offhandedness: "Have much trouble with uprisin's out in the new States?"

"Not very," Barber smiled. "But what happened? How did you put down the uprising?"

"Well, the heathen came around ag'in, yellin' notoriously, and makin' out I'd massacreed a mort of their relations. They was goin' to tell the king and have the law on me. 'Law ahead,' says I, knowin' I had the king's leave to farm this land, and the guv-ment's word has to be better'n the next man's or he'd be runnin' things. So I went down to the river and got some more trees. I skidded 'em out with Federalist—"

"Who?" interrupted Barber.

"Federalist. My hoss, that the king guv me when we made the deal. I finished my house; but it just goes to show what the Good Book says: 'Put not thy trust in princes.' Along come that king, madder'n a nest of hornets and wanted to cancel the hull deal and put me off my land. I told him I was a citizen of the U-nited States and protected by its constitution, that says the obligations of contract shall not be impaired, the way John Marshall told 'em in that there Georgia land case, a few years back. Well, he hemmed and he hawed, and the heathen with him ripped around till I got tired of hearin' 'em. I told him we Bay Staters fit a war to git rid of one king, and if he was minded to see how we did it, I'd show him right there.

"That didn't take him so good; he fizzed like a firin' pan, and I thought we was goin' to have real troublous times, till all of a sudden it come over me to say: 'See here, my hearty, there be more of us Fawcetts comin' this way, so you better not try ary monkeyshines with the first one. I be a moderate man. If those trees are special pets of yourn, you could tell me so without a lot of cock-and-bull about sperrits, for I do not believe

in vain boastin', as is related in the first book of the Kings of Israel, twentieth chapter. 'I shall make you a hoss trade,' I said to him. 'If your people'll deliver me good sound timber for some of my produce I shall leave your pet trees be.' By and by he ca'med down and seen the sense of it, and that's how it's been ever since. But it seems agin' nater to have a farm without a wood lot. I guess now I've done enough talkin'. Tell me about your trip here, mister. See ary Injuns? How'd you come by the sword?"

One sentence in the narrative had caught Barber's attention. "Oh, I got that from the—kobolds in the mountain," he parried. "But didn't you say something about more of you Fawcetts?"

The farmer sloshed the lees of his drink around the bottom of the mug and tossed it off. "Brothers," he answered briefly. "Obadiah and Lemuel—he married one of the Whiting gals. They was goin' to leave Middlesex County the summer arter me, and follow right along the Albany trail. But it's been a mighty long time, and I sometimes consider mebbe they got caught by the Injuns or some of those other heathen—" He glanced at the clock. "Time to put the victuals on," he said in a changed tone, and got up.

X.

In the ghostly gray light just before sunrise Barber was wakened by a large hand on his shoulder. For a few sleepy moments he stared uncomprehendingly upward at the side-whiskered face and the wall beyond, his body savoring the comfort of bed after many nights on the ground.

"Time to lay into the chores, mister," said Fawcett cheerfully.

Barber stretched, yawned and touched a prickly chin. The assumption that he had signed on as a farmhand struck him as pretty cool, but he contemplated the prospect without resentment. Perhaps Oberon had intended it that way. "Have you got an extra razor I could borrow?" he asked.

"Well, now that I think," replied the farmer, "that's one thing there be'nt in this hull place. They's a virtoo in the water or suthin' that makes a man's hair stay put; mine ain't growed a mite since I been here. Let's have suthin' to 'strengthen by the spirit the inner man,' as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians. I consider I be lucky, without ary stock to feed before I can have my breakfast."

The farmer clumped heavily toward the stairs. "The heathen'd probably run 'em off and call it a conjurin' trick. They're always up to tricks," he said. "I call to mind the time I planted some cukes in that little gusset of land down by the river. They come up measly little things with funny leaves. That upset the mountain heathen suthin' scandalous. They're almighty fond of cukes."

He was laying out the breakfast with slouching efficiency. "What happened?" Barber encouraged him.

"Why, they come to me, and they said: 'There has been a shapin' and your cukes have turned into ivy plants. But never you mind,' they said. 'We shall undertake to conjure 'em back for you. I told 'em to go right ahead, long's they didn't step on the plants. Nathin' much tenderer'n a young cuke. Well, the hull kit-'n'-boodle of 'em come down from the mountain and pow-wowed 'round half one night, and sure enough, the cukes growed all right arter that."

Fawcett seated himself at the table and began to eat, waving Barber to another chair. "Do you mean the conjuring really helped the cucumbers?" asked Barber.

The farmer chuckled through a mouthful of food. "Don't you think I be in my right senses? It wan't the shapin' that like to spoiled the cukes or the conjurin' that saved 'em. Hoss manure is just no good for cukes; I knowed that when I put 'em in, but it was all I had. But the day before the heathen did their fancy tricks I found a salt-lick back in the woods a piece and got some good deer manure that did the business. The tarnation heathen had the gall to ask for a reduction in the price of the crop. Well, the way seasons run here, I guess mebbe we could get in a little buckwheat today."

Barber was city-bred, and had never before experienced the contentments that rise from watching and producing the growth of the soil—seeing bare earth sprout delicate green hairs one day, so fine they were almost invisible except as a sheen; three days later returning to find them tiny but palpable plants, and in a week sturdily putting forth leaf and branch.

As early as the third day Barber had given up trying to tell the farmer about such modernities as electric light and skyscrapers. The farmer received the information with the same amused skepticism he gave to the "heathen conjurin's"—making it all seem unimportant, as indeed it was to the life of the place, and Barber lacked the information to beat down his objections.

"They was a professor down to Harvard proved a steamboat couldn't hold enough wood to take it 'cross the ocean," he would say with an air of finality, and getting out a very homemade banjo, chanted rather than sang, in a raucous nasal tenor:

"It was the brilliant autumn time
When the army of the north
With its cannon and dragoons
And its riflemen came forth.

"Through the country all abroad
There was spread a mighty fear
Of the Indians in the van
And the Hessians in the rear—"

Or they would sit above a board through a long evening, drinking berry wine and playing nine-man morris. Life rolled smoothly; Oberon, the war, his former existence were lapped deep in the wave of the past, and it might not be too bad to slide forever through this region of perfect peace.

Or almost perfect. There was the incident of the broken hoe. Both men were engaged in what Fawcett called "cultivatin'" a field of potatoes, an operation that

seemed singularly pointless to Barber, as it consisted in no more than digging vigorously with a hoe at the base of the young plants, piling the earth half an inch deeper around the stalks. "Makes a neat field," was Fawcett's only answer to Barber's protest that the few sprigs of grass rooted up in the process could be of no importance to the potatoes, which grew underground in any case. "Good farmers have neat fields."

As he brought his hoe down in a particularly vigorous sweep to emphasize some conversational point he was making, the farmer struck a sub-soil rock and the blade snapped off at the shank. He clucked annoyance over the small disaster. "Guess I shall have to make another hoss trade with the mountain heathen," he remarked, when he had replaced the instrument with another from the house. "Ain't got but three hoes to the hull place. That's funny, too, now I call it to mind. They ain't been 'round for a right smart spell; usually you can't keep 'em away, 'specially when they know I been makin' berry wine. They'd most trade their eyeteeth out for berry wine."

Next morning after breakfast he dug out a big blue-and-white flag on the end of a stick and affixed it to the roof of the house. He explained that this was the signal he wanted to trade with the kobolds. No kobolds came that day or the next. The second night Fawcett showed a trace of worry across the supper table.

"Dunno what's come over 'em; maybe they're waxed at me 'bout suthin'. They have mighty ungainly ideas about what's right, those mountain heathen, and when a man won't go 'long with 'em, they set in the seats of the scornful. But I should hate to lose their trade; ain't been ary hardware peddler through this way since I come. A man can't farm without tools."

"I could go look them up and find out what's wrong," offered Barber tentatively.

"By George, that's right! Them mountain heathen is choosy as all git out 'bout lettin' people into their place, but I fergit you was a perfessional ambassador to increase perfumes afar off in the sight of the Lord, like it says in fifty-seven Isaiah. Tell you what, mister; I shall give you a jug of berry wine in the mornin' and you mosey up there."

Barber was already repenting his overready suggestion, but there was no decent method of withdrawing. Next day he set out across the little belt of upland rolling to the Kobold Hills. As he went he became more than ever regretful over having let himself in for this piece of foolishness. The day was hot. Made thus as a reversed experience, the journey underlined something of which he had been only vaguely conscious for some time: that he felt definitely less well than he had before.

No, "felt" was the wrong verb, he assured himself, realizing with the other, critical half of his brain that the ceaseless flow of Fawcett's chatter had kept him from introspection for weeks. He "felt" like a prize bull pup, now that he thought; his sensations with regard to the world about him were of extreme enjoyment. If he could have been translated back to the embassy, he would have plunged into the compilation of official reports with positive delight.

In short, he felt swell. It was the physical equipment that accompanied his feelings that seemed to be showing deterioration. His legs were stiff. And was it hypochondriac imagination, or had they acquired a tendency to bow? The other manifestation was real enough; his feet had spread outrageously. The shoes made by the royal tailor he had been forced to discard at the end of the first week at Fawcett's. Now he was wearing a pair of the farmer's enormous boots, and even these, which had begun by fitting him like bedroom slippers, were now pinching painfully.

There was something wrong with his eyes, too. When not consciously focused on something, they had a tendency to roll outward—not painful, but noticeable when he discovered that he was seeing double. It must be some kind of allergy or vitamin deficiency, he decided. It might be due to a diet which, though it included plenty of fresh vegetables, lacked dairy products and any meat but the venison Fawcett secured by trading with the "heathen." At all events it appeared to have the compensating benefit of causing those absurd shoulder blade wings of his to stop growing. They had actually shrunk an inch or two.

Barber was at the entrance of the caverns. All dark inside, and now that he noticed it, all silent, too. It seemed absurd to plunge into that well of night, and equally absurd to turn back without trying it. After a moment more of irresolution, he gathered force and took the step, feeling along the wall with one hand.

The wall was slightly damp, and the deeper he went the more he cursed himself for a fool—with no light or Ariadne's clue to bring him out again. He started counting his steps, trying to keep them even in length, which would be at least some help— Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four—he paused, turned and looked back at the shield of light. Still there— A hundred and forty-nine, a hundred and fifty—he turned again, saw the light-spot smaller, and wished he had started counting at the very mouth of the tunnel.

A hundred yards more—and the supporting wall at his right suddenly disappeared, so that he went sprawling. Branch in the tunnel. It brought him face to face with the problem of carrying on, through those blind involuted galleries. No, certainly not worth it, with no lights and no sign of life. He compromised by standing at the angle for a moment and shouting. There was no answer but the monotonous drip, drip, drip of the subterranean water. After waiting a few more hopeless moments he turned and groped his way back.

When he reached the mouth of the cavern, the morning's faint overcast had turned to cloud and persistent, drizzling rain that felt delightful after the heat. Fawcett was nowhere visible as Barber trudged across the rises toward the homestead. Neither was the horse, Federalist. That probably meant that the farmer had ridden up the stream to indulge in his favorite rainy day sport of conducting a trade with the forest natives.

BARBER WENT INTO the house and upstairs to a room which was used relatively rarely. Fawcett had furnished it with unusual elaboration, even to window curtains of his own manufacture and in materials that had probably never been used for curtaining before. It was the sturdy Yank's one touch of sentiment, the one indication that he might harbor the thought of a partnership in this wilderness. Barber had found him reticent on the point except when the farmer delivered one of his occasional tirades on the habits of the heathen.

"Them women, now," he would say, waving his mug of wine. "Some of 'em are purty as a pitcher; look like good workers, too. But they skrawk 'round like chick-turkeys with the pip till a man could chaw the wall. They have a superstition; you say suthin' to 'em, and accordin' to their rules, they's only two-three replies they can make."

Barber jumped to his feet with sudden horror. When he had come into that room and seated himself in the homemade rocking chair, there had certainly been a pair of flies cruising about the ceiling. The door was closed, and the windows, but the flies were no longer there—

And Barber could remember distinctly that while he had been meditating on Fawcett's sentimental spot, he had once—twice—shot a hand out, with the ease of reflex action, and put it to his mouth.

He began to pace the floor in agitation, hunting for the answer, then paused with a flash of recollection. It was his own fault. He had allowed himself to sink into the contentment of this farm. But it was not the discovery of the good life, it was old-fashioned shirking. The venture into the Kobold Caverns had been only half his task. The responsibility remained. Whatever had gone wrong with him would probably, nay certainly, grow worse till he finished his job. It was the "misadventured piteous overthrow" the queen had promised.

And how was he to finish that job? How find his way back through the caverns, across the desert and to the plum who had taken that confounded stick? Damn it! He kicked at air in irritation over the unfairness of everything. Why did all these Fairyland people have to be so vague? Fawcett was the only one in the lot capable of a definite statement, and now Barber was being forced to leave him behind.

A sound outside made him step to the window. Fawcett was riding into the yard, with rain dripping from his own hat and the horse's mane, an expression of pleasure on his sideburned face. The trading expedition had evidently been a success; across his saddlebow was a large and bulging bag, incongruously made of cloth-of-gold, with the handle of something sticking out of it. It occurred to Barber that the last thing in the world he wanted was to explain his plight to that cold-eyed and skeptical New Englander. He took three quick steps across the room, flung open the door, and dashed into his own room. The sword was there; he snatched it up, went down the stairs three at a time, and looked out the kitchen window. Fawcett had just dismounted, and was leading Federalist into the sod house barn.

Barber stepped quickly to the door of the kitchen-living room and out, slipped around the house to put it between him and the farmer, and started off. He looked back now and then, changing direction slightly to keep the bulk of the buildings between him and the house, and so angling away from the Kobold Hills. The rain felt good on his face.

Not till he was passing among the first sentinels of a line of trees did he remember the Kobold caves again and the fact that he was leaving Fawcett in quite genuine trouble, with his supply of iron tools cut off. If he found the wand and returned to Oberon with it, perhaps that monarch would do something for the farmer.

If he found the wand.

XI.

THE trees drew in around him to form an extensive grove. Big, slow drops slipped from their branches, and the going was heavy. But when Barber glanced aloft he saw a streak of blue among the clouds, and by the time he had reached the far side of the tree belt the sun broke through to shine down, clear and bright, as though nature itself were smiling on his resolution to take the road again. Here the ground pitched down across a meadow of rank grass toward a watercourse—probably the river to which Fawcett had occasionally referred.

The river ran on sluggishly, not much wider than that in *the* forest. It spread into a pool where Barber paused on its bank in the shade of a tall poplar. There was yellow sand on the bottom, spotted with dead leaves, cool and inviting in its rippled refraction. Nothing else moved but a pair of dragonflies patrolling over the pool, intent on their own particular brand of murder.

Barber paused, one hand on the poplar trunk. He contemplated the dragonflies and realized he was hungry. When they flew in opposite directions his eyes swung out on independent orbits, one following each of the insects, and his appetite increased.

Hell, he was getting to the stage of wanting to eat dragonflies! Titania's "overthrow" was affecting his mind as well as his body.

What he needed was a swim. Maybe that would snap him out of it.

He peered along the line of poplars, saw no one and nothing, and undressed with fumbling haste.

The poplar roots had assembled enough earth around themselves to make a little hummock at the edge of the pool. He stood erect on it for a moment, stretched comfortably, took a deep breath and dove.

No shock. As soon as he was well under water he opened his eyes. The thought flashed across his mind that this was the strangest swim or the strangest water that he had ever been in. There was curiously no feeling of wetness. Below him lay the mottled yellow-and-brown bottom, clear and bright, but much farther down

than it had looked from above. He might almost have been floating through an aqueous atmosphere in one of those Freudian dreams of wingless flight.

He drew up his legs and kicked, in the strong underwater stroke that should carry him out across the pool to the surface. The drive shot him forward above the bottom at such alarming speed that he backed water, and with a flashing sensation of surprise, he found himself hanging suspended over nothingness.

At the same moment he realized that he had really been under long enough to come up for air, but that his lungs were not protesting in the least, he was getting along without man's most intimate necessity in perfect comfort.

He tried another powerful kick, and the bottom rushed up at him as though he were falling from a skyscraper window. He hit it at an angle and bounced, tumbling head over heels, in a cloud of fine sand that obscured his vision. As it settled, with the larger flakes corkscrewing slowly past, he picked himself up and felt for bumps.

There seemed to be nothing damaged. Standing on tiptoe, he launched out again and found himself once more soaring over the bottom in that strange wingless flight, sustained by the surrounding medium. It must be as graceful to watch as it was easy to perform.

A SILVERY titter of laughter floated to him from above, right and rear. Barber spun round.

"Kaja!" he cried.

A slim, red-haired girl was drifting easily, twenty feet from him. She made a slight paddling motion and slid easily into position beside him.

"Sorry, old dear," she said, "but the name's Cola. Or Arvicola, if you want to be formal, which I don't think. You do look so fonnie, swimming like that." Even her voice had a trace of accent, like Kaja's, but what Barber caught was the insult to his swimming. He hated being ridiculous.

"What's the matter with my swimming?"

"For a frog your age? About as elegant as a drowning beetle."

Barber raised an eyebrow. Kaja had been like that, too—always with a note of jeering banter, as though nothing life had to offer were worth the taking. "Did you say a frog?"

"Yes, froggie." She laughed again.

Barber looked down. "First time I ever heard of a frog with hair on his chest," he remarked practically.

"Gahn." The derisive word had the note of the London streets, and then her voice turned ladylike again. "You froggies aren't veddy clever, are you? And no wonder, coming out of eggs."

Barber remained good-humored. "All right, then, I'm a frog, you newt."

Her eyes—they were green eyes—seemed to snap. "I'll thank you to be civil. After all, we voles belong to the higher orders, as though you didn't know."

"Oh, yes. And I suppose you were a baroness once. Isn't that usual with water rats?"

There was another and harder snap to her eyes. "Listen," she said, "I don't know why I take the trouble to stay here and be insulted, and I won't, either, if you carry on that way. The next time you call me a water rat—"

"I'm sorry," said Barber, and was. "I didn't mean to insult you. I was just carrying on your joke about frogs and—er, voles."

"Joke!" She laughed aloud, her head came forward and a pair of green eyes searched his. "Poor frog, I see now. You're new, and don't know the Laws of the Pool yet. Come with me."

A warm hand gave his a tug, and she shot off, slanting upward. She was half concealed in a dimness that began in the middle distance before Barber whipped up his muscles to start after her, and for the first few strokes he followed a receding pale blob. But he was pleased to note that once started, he gained fast, and by the time they reached the silvery, rippling overhead he was up with her.

Barber scrambled out of the water on all fours. He half turned to where he expected his lovely companion to be and opened his mouth to say, "You see—"

A deep, reverberating croak was all that came out.

Barber made a frantic effort to stand up, and fell forward on his chin. Or rather, on his lower lip. He had no chin.

He looked down and saw a pair of thick, stubby arms, covered with speckled skin. He was a frog, all right.

A few feet away a rodent of about his own size sat on the edge of the pool, her wide, luminous eyes and sharply chiseled features bearing the same subhuman resemblance to Kaja that an ape often has to an Irishman. What color its fur was he could not tell, for the picture registered by his widely diverging eyes was one of blacks, whites and grays. He was color-blind.

The vole studied him for a moment with bright, amused eyes, lifted a paw in a beckoning motion, and slipped smoothly into the water.

Barber humped himself around—awkwardly, because his limbs were not articulated for any wide variety of movement—and leaped after her. He had forgotten the power in his great jumping legs. Air whistled past as he soared far out over the water. He caught one glimpse of his own reflection, bruised by surface ripples, with great jeweled eyes, stubby arms spread, webfooted hindlegs trailing back, and then came down in a tremendous belly whopper.

The red-haired girl was floating lazily beside him in the medium that seemed more normal than air. "Wiped your eye that time, old thing," she jeered. "You froggies are *so* clever. Really, you know, you should take the strong, silent and handsome line with a figure like that."

Barber looked at himself. To the eye he was again the man who had dived from under the poplar. No, he was a better man, for all the ominous imperfections of his arrival in Fairyland had vanished, including the stump wings.

"Uh-huh," he said humbly. "Look here, is there some place where we can talk? You said something about the Laws of the Pool, and I really don't know anything about them. I'd be awfully obliged—"

"Poor stupid froggie. Come on, then." She turned, and he followed her down an invisible slope that ended at a group of gigantic roots which sprang from the bottom to twist in again. Cola stretched herself along one of them with an arm bent behind her neck, and comfortably wiggled her toes. "The Laws of the Pool are these," she half-chanted, "To reverence by day the gods to which we pray—"

"Beg pardon," interrupted Barber, "but isn't that a sort of catechism you're supposed to learn? Because I'm on a mission and I hope—that is, I may not stay here long, so most of it wouldn't be much use to me."

The eyes widened and she lifted her head to gaze at him again. "Oh, re-ahlly," with a galling note of incredulity. "A froggie with a mission! For Sir Lacomar, I presume?"

"No. For King Oberon, if you must know."

"The Father of the Gods? Don't try to come it over me, froggie."

"What do you mean, Father of the Gods? He's no different from you or me."

"Oh, why do you have to be so stupid! Didn't I just take you to the surface? But wait, you're new. Listen, poor foolish froggie; the gods can walk in air and not change. Though I don't believe that tradition about them punishing evildoers by catching them and heating them. Not half. They jolly well do take some of us away, but *I* think it's mostly those they like and want to translate to their own sphere. They took Rana the other day, and she never did anything wrong in her life. It would be wonderful to be made into a God."

"Oh. Isn't there any way it can happen without being taken from the pool?"

"Only when the redbeard comes. That's part of the Laws of the Pool, you know:

"When the redbeard comes again,
Then shall fairies turn to men—"

She sang it to the same tune Malacca had used when she disappeared into the forest, then broke off suddenly and became practical:

"What about the other Laws, froggie? Want them or no? I haven't all day."

"My name's not froggie; it's Fred Barber. And I'd be awfully obliged if you could tell me one or two things. Perhaps I could learn more that way. For instance, I'm hunting for a wand that belongs to Queen Titania. It was stolen from me. Have you any idea where it

could be?" If she laughed at him again, he was ready to give up hope.

But she didn't. "That mission again, frog—Fred?" she said, with a bantering air that carried no sting, and frowned thought. "I re-ahlly don't know unless . . . unless—"

"Go on."

"Come closer," said Cola.

He did so and leaned over to catch the words she was barely whispering: "Unless the Low One has it. They say he gets everything sooner or later. Oh!" She put her hands to her face. "Perhaps I've done the forbidden thing just talking about Him, and the Gods will punish me. I don't know why I did—"

"Have you ever seen him?"

"Please, don't." Little lines of strain and tragedy set in the vole's delicate face. She went on, so low he could hardly hear: "If he really has the wand of the Mother of Gods, there's no limit to what he can do."

"Where does he live?"

She said: "You don't want to go there, Fred. Nobody does."

"Yes I do. If he's got that wand, I'm going to get it."

"What a brave froggie!" But her voice was shaky. "You couldn't get it. You couldn't do anything. Please, Fred, listen to me."

"Then you won't tell me."

"No."

He stood up. How like Kaja she was! They had quarreled this way a dozen times, but every time he yielded she had despised him for her very victory. That was why— "O. K., young lady," he said, "then I'll have to ask somebody else."

"You're not really going?"

"Right this minute."

"But Fred—" The green eyes were desperate, and then her expression changed. "All right, then, go! You don't even know the Laws, you silly helpless frog! You'll get what's coming to you, and I hope you do!"

"I'll find someone to tell me about them."

"Who? There's only old Sir Lacomar, the mutton-headed old pot, and he's so busy watching the mussels he won't even speak to you."

Further argument seemed useless. Barber poised to take off, then felt the old tug Kaja always brought to his heartstrings, the old fascination that would never quite let him play the game to win. He turned. "If I stay," he said, "will you—"

"No! I never want to see you again, you . . . you frog!"

As Barber kicked himself away and soared easily through the water, she was suddenly shaken with sobs.

XII.

Barber kept quite close to the bank for a distance that seemed like a couple of miles but was probably much less. At this point he saw something moving down and to the left in the murky distance. As he approached, it resolved itself into a man, pulling a crude hand plow across the bottom.

The man glanced up at Barber, dropped his plow, snatched at a huge shield that hung down his back by a strap around his neck, flopped himself down and pulled the shield over him.

"Hey!" said Barber, lighting beside the shield. It remained motionless.

Barber sat down to wait. This was most unlikely to be anything but one of the mussels.

In due time the shield shifted a trifle. An eye peeked out and was followed by a head. The head was apparently satisfied, for the mussel heaved the shield up and himself after it. "Thought you was a trout," he remarked by way of apology. He was stocky, muscular, stoop-shouldered, with high cheekbones and a dead-white skin, hairless as a fish.

Barber said: "Hello. My name's Barber."

"Call me Joe," said the mussel.

"Nice little farm you have here."

"O. K.," said the mussel. "I got a farm. So what?"

"Nothing. I just wondered if you were one of Sir Lacomar's people."

Joe spat, the spittle drifting off to dissolution. He jerked a thumb toward the river bank. "Awright. I work for Lacomar. An' I think he's a jerk, a lousy slave driver. So what?"

"Nothing. I was looking for someone else. Can you tell me where the Low One lives?"

The mussel stuck his head forward. "Smart guy, huh? You frogs are all smart guys."

"Why? Is he coming this way?"

"Me, I wouldn't know. I just plow."

"Would it make any difference to you if he did?"

"Prob'ly not." Barber knew the mussel was not sure whether he was lying or not. "You get rid of one boss, you get another. It's all part of the system. Skip it, Mac, skip it."

Barber persisted: "Aren't you afraid of what'll happen if the Low One comes?"

"Not 'specially." He lied. Even without the special sense he had acquired in Fairyland Barber could have detected the undercurrent of fear. So did Joe, the mussel, and rushed on into explanation: "The system's all wrong, see? It's gotta be put through the wringer before we get a right break and maybe he's the only guy can do it."

"Isn't it against the Laws of the Pool to talk the way you have about Sir Lacomar and the Low One? What if I told on you? Though, of course, I won't if you give me a little information." Barber rather hated to do it, but he had to find out.

"So, you're a snitch, an agent provocateur? My word against yours, funny face. Gwan, now, beat it, before I dust you off, you goon." The mussel slung his shield over his back and glumly set off, dragging his plow.

Barber soared up and looked around. There were two or three other mussels in sight, each stonily pulling

at a plow, but their expressions promised a reception no less surly than that he had received from Joe, and he headed toward the bank.

Sure enough, there was where it began to slope up, a circular tower of rough stones. On the top of this tower, with his feet hanging down, sat a bulbous, ruddy-faced man. He was nearly bald, with prominent, china-blue eyes and a handlebar mustache.

Barber swam for the top of the tower and hung suspended. "Hello," he said.

"Hello, froggie," said the ruddy man.

"The name's Barber."

"Barber, eh? Relative of the barbels? Good fellas, stout fighters. They bear azure and argent, barry-wavy of six. What's your arms? Wait, I forget; frogs aren't armigerous. All poets; no fight in 'em."

"Mind if I sit awhile?"

"Not at all, old chap. Saw one of your musical relatives the other day—what was his name? Hylas. Thought his singing very nice, though I don't pretend to understand such things. Soldiers don't get much time."

Barber sat down on the parapet. He noted that a pile of plate armor lay behind the big man. "You're Sir Lacomar, aren't you?" he asked.

"Right."

"Miss Arvicola suggested I look you up."

"Oh, you know Cola? Splendid girl." Sir Lacomar held out a large red hand to be shaken. "Bit wild and free with her tongue. Don't know that I blame her, though, seeing the devil of a time she's had with You-know-who. Glad I've been able to do a favor or two for her."

The audience was friendly but the matter had better be approached gradually. Barber asked for local news.

Sir Lacomar said: "A few things, here and there. The usual. Trout made a raid from one of the tributaries last week. Got poor old Krebitz, but we routed 'em handsomely."

"Oh. One of your fellow-crawfish?"

"Naturally. Splendid chap; one of the Astak family, who bear argent a blood-ax gules. Very old line, but he was a younger son and had to difference it. I remember the time Krebitz and Sir Karkata and I drove a whole tribe of bullheads from the Muddy Pool. They were lined up like this, y'see"—he illustrated with a string of pebbles—"when we took 'em in the flank and then, Santiago for the red and white! I say, that was a real fight. I lost an arm."

Barber looked at Sir Lacomar's two muscular arms.

"Came off near the shoulder," Lacomar went on, without noticing, "and that's always a bad business. Had to go into retreat for months while I was growing the new one. Don't know who'll take the war cry and the profit after Krebitz; young Cambarus, most likely. He's the old man's sister's grandson. But an unlicked whelp—an unlicked whelp; never been blooded, and he has no real right to be Warden of the Inner March, because that doesn't pass in the female line. I suppose Scudo will put in his claim and then You-know-who will want to arbitrate."

"Are you people going to let him?"

"Hah! Not without putting up the standard and giving Him the battle of His life. That's His way of getting a foot in the door. Did it with the trout in the West Reach, you know. Not that anyone minded what happened to that crew of damned pirates. Served 'em right."

"Didn't they fight?"

"Tried. But they were disorganized, d'you see, and had no proper weapons. Not like us. Besides, the Gods took their chief, Christy, just as the attack started. They're always just."

"Perhaps," said Barber, "they were less interested in Christy's character than in his edibility."

Sir Lacomar's face froze a trifle. "Now, now, young fella, don't blaspheme. All very well to talk that way among your fellow-poets, and personally, I quite understand you have to be a little loose in your morals, keep up the artist's life, eh? Sowed a few wild oats myself, once. But it simply won't do if you want to be taken up by the right people. Sort of thing a mussel would say."

"Thanks. I'll watch it," said Barber humbly. "They're not very well brought up, are they?"

The knight snorted. "Wouldn't do 'em any good if they were. Education, my boy, is something for which the masses are not fitted. Like trying to make a sword out of a piece of wood; must have a bit of the right stuff first. What they need is a spot of discipline. Now, mind you"—he shook a finger under Barber's nose—"I'll grant What's-his-name is no gentleman, and He gave little Cola a pretty thin time of it, but you must admit He does know how to make His own people look sharp. He'll turn them into something yet, mark my word. Wouldn't do my mussels any harm to have a bit of that treatment, the ungrateful beggars."

The crawfish-knight was actually puffing in his indignation and Barber judged it prudent to change the subject. "You know," he said, "I'm on rather a serious mission as it happens. I'm looking for a piece of property that belongs to the Mother of the Gods, and I've been led to believe it might be in Whoozis' possession. Could you suggest how I might go about recovering it?"

Sir Lacomar frowned. "Don't know about that, my boy. I hardly think You-know-who would violate property rights. Not His style; too big for that sort of thing, if you understand."

"All the same I'd like to look into it. Where does Thingumbob keep himself?"

"Nobody knows but Cola, and she doesn't tell. You might ask the leeches. They're subjects of His."

"Where do I find them?"

"Upstream a way, where a tributary comes in from the right bank."

"Well, I think I'll go see. Good-by and thanks." Barber poised on the edge of the tower to take off.

"Bye, old man, and 'ware fish. Oh, by the way, I'd

be grateful if you'd look into His methods a little. Interested in finding out how He achieves such order."

As BARBER swam upstream, a vague general malaise told him, more through instinct than reason, that he needed another breath of air. He slid easily upward and his eyes broke surface into that dead, black-and-white world which faded into a blur at any distance. His eye caught the fleeting movement of a shadow on the bottom as he propelled himself through the atmosphere—hydrosphere—with easy, powerful strokes, and it occurred to him that his froggishness had made him not too ill-adapted to this new environment. Compare it with the world above, he told himself smugly.

"Good morning! Good afternoon! Good evening!" called a voice. Barber looked down to find himself just moving past the entrance of a tributary so hidden in reeds that he might have missed it altogether but for the sound. He banked and planed down beside the curious-looking individual who had called out. Like the mussels, he was innocent of hair. Forehead and chin receded from a sharp-nosed, vacuous face whose mouth was set in a mechanical grin; there was a nice, suntan brown around the grin, but whenever the individual moved it became evident that his back was green, a sharp dividing line running down arms and ribs.

A limp boneless hand was thrust into Barber's. "Welcome to Hirudia!" said the individual, with energy. "Welcome to the land of order and plenty!"

XIII.

BARBER said: "That sounds very pleasant. Can you tell me where I can find the leeches? Unless you're one of them."

"Of course I'm a leech, and proud of it!" Green-back whistled sharply, and from among the reed columns was joined by three more, bearing to him the same maddening resemblance that Chinese have for each other. All bowed. "Visitors are welcome to Hirudia, sir! We are honored to escort you—an unforgettable experience."

The last phrase was a trifle ambiguous, and Barber found the welcome a disturbing parody of that he had received in the Kobold Hills. "Well, I don't know that I want to go that far," he said. "Perhaps you could give me the information I want."

"Certainly, sir. It would give us the greatest pleasure."

"Very well. Can you tell me where the Low One lives?"

"We're very sorry, indeed, sir, but we are not allowed to discuss political matters. There are certain regulations, as I'm sure you'll understand. But if you would care to step into Hirudia, the Boss could inform you. The Boss knows everything."

"Who is your Boss?"

"Why, he's our father and mother! It was the Boss who rescued us from weakness and disorganization, and co-ordinated us into our present state of order and progress. He keeps us safe from the depredations of the trout, and protects us from the encirclement of the crawfish. A wonderful person! So modest and intelligent! We'd do anything for the Boss."

There was something not too reassuring about this avowal, the more so since Barber's lie-detecting sense gave him no intimation that the leeches were lying. He hoped the Boss was as good-natured as he seemed to be admired. In any case, the leeches were undersized, flabby creatures, visibly weaponless. If it came to another Kobold Cavern difficulty, he could handle a dozen of them—and he had here an advantage he had never held there. He could leap up; swim away at a speed he was certain the leeches could not match.

A sense of confidence in his own powers enveloped him as he followed the first leech, with the other three behind. The leader chattered continuously over his shoulder. "Hirudia has become a changed place since our Boss arrived. You wouldn't recognize it. Everything systematic, the work done so easily and efficiently. The rest of the world will some day learn to appreciate us, whom they have neglected. We cannot remain forever hemmed in among the reeds."

"Hm-m-m," said Barber. "And what's your personal part in this, if I may ask?"

"Me? Oh, I have leisure."

"You have leisure?"

"Certainly. Take the mussels, for instance. They live in one of the old-fashioned, competitive communities, where economic pressure forces everyone to endless and hopeless labor." He rattled this off like a train of cars going over a switch, then paused and added proudly: "*Our* Boss assigns certain of us to the duty of having leisure. We take it outside the city, where passers-by can see us and know the lies that are told about our beautiful land for what they are. That is social justice."

"I should think you'd get bored," said Barber.

"Bored? Oh, no! Boredom is a product of the class system and social disintegration. One never gets bored in Hirudia. It would be disloyalty to the achievements of our Boss."

The answer was glib as ever and the tone unchanged, but a red light burned within Barber's mind, signifying "lie."

THEY wound through alleys of tall reed trunks, like the pillars of Karnak, till they reached a wall which stretched up and sidewise to the limit of vision. The leading leech whistled, up scale and down, and a section of the wall sprang open without visible agency. Behind it was another wall, with a narrow slit through which an eye scrutinized them suspiciously before this wall, too, opened, but in a different place. Beyond it the guiding leech whistled again, another tune, before a third wall—and then came another and another and another, alternately guarded by eye and ear, till Barber lost count.

A last wall opened to reveal an immense plaza where reed trunks grew from the bottom, but in strict geo-

metrical rows with open spaces between. Many more leeches were in sight, all alike as eggs, and all furiously busy. Just to the left of the gate a group of three were building a narrow tower of bricks. One brought the bricks from a pile, a second sat at the top of the tower, hauling them up in a basket, while the third laid the bricks. Barber observed that the tower was not really a tower, but a solid, square monolith without openings or exterior features.

"What's that for?" he asked his guide.

"I don't know, sir, but it has social importance or it would not have been ordered by our Boss. In enlightened ages, all the public works have social importance."

Barber glanced at him sharply. "The purpose is what I was trying to find out," he observed. "May I ask the workers?"

The four leeches drew apart and consulted, whisper, whisper again, and their leader came back. "Unlike the decadent feudalisms, Hirudia has nothing to hide. We shall be glad to have you ask any worker anything."

The next time the brick carrier appeared with his hod, Barber inquired: "Beg pardon, but could you tell me what this brick thing is?"

The leech leaned his hod against the tower and began heaving bricks into the basket at a furious rate, whipping out a word or two at a time between heaves: "Cultural—object, sir—ordered by—the Boss."

Barber's four guides had clustered round to listen with an intentness that was almost painful, their heads stretched forward and cocked to one side. Now they exchanged smiles.

"But why are you doing the work?" persisted Barber.

"Because—I love—the Boss—would die—for him—we all—love him—excuse please." The leech had emptied the hod and filled the basket, and now he trotted off. He had certainly lied; never had Barber's new sixth sense given him a clearer warning. But never, either, had there been a more bewilderingly complete lack of use for the knowledge. He decided he had been mistaken about the resemblance to the Kobolds. At least that lot had been enjoying themselves.

Barber said: "I'd like very much to see more of your city, but this is more of a business trip than a visit for me. When can I see your Boss?"

"We're taking you to him," said one of the guides. At this end of the plaza the reed columns were spaced wider, and through them there became visible buildings of a cyclopean architecture, flat, fat and squatty. They came to a halt, while one of the leeches went into a blocky structure.

In a surprisingly short time he was back. "The Boss is holding an important conference. Will the gentleman come with us to the place of attendance?"

"What's that?" demanded Barber, his suspicions now unappeasably aroused.

"The place where gentlemen who wish to see the Boss wait," purred the leech. "In Hirudia everything is done systematically."

"How long do they have to wait?"

"Very little time." (Lie.) "Every comfort will be at your disposal" (Lie) "and you may leave to conduct other business whenever you wish." (Lie.)

"Sorry," said Barber. "Convey my respects to your Boss and say that I regretted not having seen him, but I had business that couldn't wait. Which is the quickest way out of here?"

"Oh!" said all four leeches together. "You don't want to leave Hirudia! You haven't seen half of it! You want to come with us to the place of attendance!"

"No," said Barber. "I know what I want, and that is to get out of here. Will you please—"

The leeches interrupted: "Sir, it is contrary to regulations and good sense for anyone to leave Hirudia until he fully understands it." "You cannot understand beautiful Hirudia in a few minutes." "Perhaps he's socially underdeveloped." "Needs instruction."

Barber pointed at random. He barked: "Is that the way out?"

"No," said a leech. Barber knew it was a lie, and set off in the direction indicated. The leeches followed him, yammering that he was being impulsive instead of reasonable; that he didn't want to leave Hirudia; that he hadn't seen—

Other leeches swarmed out of the buildings and joined the procession till there were dozens of them

around and beside him, all talking at once. One worked up courage enough to grab Barber's arm. He shook the flaccid hand off angrily. The clamor grew louder.

"You can't get away, sir!" they cried. "Why try?" "Anything is better than having trouble and people getting hurt, isn't it?" "Honestly, we're nice fellows, not so different from you; why not join us?" "When you really understand us, you won't want to leave." "Don't cause a commotion, sir, please! It's so uncivilized." "Here's a fair warning—if you provoke us to the use of force it will be all your own fault."

Oh, to hell with this babble, thought Barber. He could still swim. He flexed his muscles and took off, rising over the leeches' heads and the featureless pediments of their buildings. A powerful leg kick sent him in the direction where he hoped the exit was, cursing himself for never being able to remember turns.

The leeches were coming along behind, all right, with an undulating stroke, swimming fast, though not so fast as he was.

Something went *bong, bong,* slowly and with decision. More leeches appeared, swarming up from all directions out of the boxlike buildings. Barber dodged round a tower that reared itself above the rest, and found two right in his path, vacuous mouths open, arms spread to catch him. He gave another leg stroke and at the same moment swung at the nearer; fist met jaw with a soulful violence, and he felt the flimsy bones crumble. "Left hook!" he shouted for no reason as the other leech dodged, wrapped itself around his leg and began to chew his calf. A kick flung it loose; beneath him legions of leeches were streaming up with outstretched arms, while the two he had disposed of drifted away, belly up.

Yet that brief delay had given those ahead time to get past his level, and now as Barber looked, he perceived he was the center of a sphere of leeches. They were closing in with evident reluctance, but closing. Where was the exit? The sphere seemed denser at one side; that was probably it; they would concentrate to keep him in. He charged in that direction. One leech, braver than the rest, stood straight across his path. He butted it amidships, and from the tail of his eye saw it turn belly up as he kicked and punched his way through the soft, clutching things.

They gave; he sped through, dodged scattered single leeches still floating up, and found himself over the great plaza. A few foreshortened forms were visible below, one or two swimming toward him, but for the most part it was empty. He slid across it, outdistancing pursuit here in the open, feeling free at last—until he saw the reason.

All up and down, the great wall was a solid mass of leeches. He dived toward the base of the wall where the gate was. They gave way before his rush. No gate; the wall loomed smooth as a mirror, and around him on every side were the leeches in a hemisphere, millions of them, blotting out the light with their bodies and inching in.

Barber got his feet on the ground and his back to the wall and cocked his fists for a last-ditch struggle. Might possibly discourage them. The leeches inched in, their array thickening as the radius of the sphere lessened. Their hands spread, when the pressure of the wall against Barber's shoulder blades ceased.

He took two steps, threw a wild, menacing punch to drive the nearest back, and spun to face whatever leeches were coming from behind.

It was not leeches; or, rather, there were only two. Between them stood Arvicola, Sir Lacomar, and another knight, the last two clad from top to toe in armor.

XIV.

One of the newcomer leeches said: "What's this? Most unseemly; just when we are bringing visitors to admire—"

This was as far as he got. Sir Lacomar crossed his arms in front of him, fists down, and jerked them up, whipping paired broadswords out of their sheaths. They hit the two leeches simultaneously, the blades shearing deep into soft bodies. The other knight's visor came down clang; with a long, lashing blade he disemboweled a venturesome leech that dove at them from above.

"Outside, you two!" roared Lacomar. "We'll cover the bloody retreat!"

But the gates beyond were closed; and even as Barber and Arvicola turned to that inmost gate, it slid smoothly into position behind them. The four were inside Hirudia and held there.

Pressure from the constantly growing mass drove the nearest leeches, willy-nilly, in on the two knights. For a few seconds they moved in a web of whirling steel before the tide surged back amid squeals of panic fear.

Lacomar glanced over his shoulder. "What are you waiting for, froggie? Told you to push off."

"The gate's closed," said Barber.

He gave a little leap, and his point just caught a dangling knee. "Ha, Santiago! Open it, froggie."

"Can't. Don't know how."

The other knight boomed something that was lost in the recesses of his helmet, turned, and ran his sword along the surface of the wall behind them, searching for the joint. It gave the exquisite shriek of a pin dragged across a windowpane, but wall and gate fitted solidly. He snapped up his visor. "The frog's right," he said. "No way out."

"Tell him to produce an idea," said Lacomar, still facing out and up. "Frogs always have ideas."

"Not this one or this time," said Barber grimly.

Arvicola said, with obvious effort: "There is another way out. It—leads through His—"

"Good!" said Lacomar. "Show us the way, old gal."

"How about lending me one of those swords?" asked Barber. Lacomar looked surprised, then doubtful. "Be damned!" said the other knight. "A fighting frog! Here, take my anlace." He fumbled at his belt and handed Barber an object like a clove, all metal and

about two feet long. It balanced well and had dangerous-looking spikes around the head.

"Swim or walk?" asked Barber.

"Swim?" boomed the stranger knight. "Not in this hardware." And Lacomar gave a dry chuckle. "Told you frogs always have ideas—usually wrong uns."

THEY set out, Lacomar leading with his two-sword sweep, Barber and the other knotting around Arvicola. At the third step the leeches burst into a frantic gabble of shouts and squeals: "Give up?" "Come with us—you'll be treated kindly!" "You've put up enough resistance to make your showing—it will be all right; we understand good fighters!" They gave no answer, and after a minute or two of talking themselves into a fury, the creatures charged again.

Barber was the center of a circle of clutching arms and biting mouths. He laid about him furiously. Once Arvicola screamed and clung to his left arm; he executed a difficult pirouette with a leech clinging to his legs, and drove the anlace, once and repeat, into the faces of the pair who had her by the shoulders. They collapsed, floating away upward, but another dived in from behind to catch him by the throat and carry him to his knees. Here we go, he thought, but a voice bellowed something like "Tambo!" and the pressure relaxed. He scrambled up to see the stranger knight stand over him; the fight was ended for the moment, with fragments of leech bodies drifting dejectedly past through the water. Cola's white skin bore several scratches, and the lines round her mouth were etched deep, but on Sir Lacomar's face there was only a look of intense and joyous concentration.

"Look sharp, now," he said, "before they get over that last bout. Which way, Cola?"

The girl pointed, and they ducked through the row of pillars around the plaza, with the leeches forming a hemisphere of foes around them. Ahead was a flight of long and wide steps that might be the entrance to an impressive building had it not been hidden by the moving swarm of leeches. Sir Lacomar led the way up, Arvicola touching him on the shoulder now and then to indicate a change of direction.

The illumination dimmed suddenly, and Barber, looking up, could see no more leeches right above.

Something went *bong* once with the same deliberate and decisive note that had heralded the first attack on Barber. There was a rumble; some kind of gate or movable wall slid to and cut off all sight of their pursuers. Now it was almost utterly dark, with the only light a faint bluish glow, whose source was high on a pair of cyclopean pillars. The source moved so that the light changed and threw curious shadows across their faces. "Ha!" barked the stranger knight. "We'll make a night affair of it. Good thing there are few of us. Get in one another's way." His sword made a soughing sound as he whipped it around his head, but Lacomar said: "No, bad tactics, Acravis; dark for the attack, but light for the approach," and signed to Arvicola.

She detached herself from the group and dived smoothly upward to one of the light sources. Barber saw her fumble briefly; then light and vole together darted across to the other pillar, and in a moment she was back with a blue-glowing something in either hand.

"Take this," she said, and handed him something that squirmed so he almost dropped it. When he gripped hard its radiance brightened angrily, and he could make it out as a sort of superworm, the size of a frankfurter.

"Hold it gently, Fred-froggie," she whispered, "but tight enough so it doesn't get away." She shivered with obvious nervousness.

Sir Lacomar swept out a powerful arm and drew their heads together. "You first, Acravis," he counseled, "then Cola, Barber, and I'll bring up the rear. Can get a better cut that way. Heavy metal in reserve."

Barber asked the question that had been worrying him. "How did you two happen in at the right moment?"

Arvicola turned and touched his arm. "I—was afraid for you, so asked Sir Lacomar— You're such a bloody fool, Fred."

"If we get out of this—" began Barber, and then stopped. He had intended promising to do anything she wanted, but what could a strictly temporary frog do for a water rat—if he was a temporary frog.

"Look here." Lacomar's voice rang out, suddenly loud, behind him. "Why were you afraid, my gal? This leech Boss isn't—His Nibs, is he?"

The girl turned a stricken face. "Yes. Quiet. If he hears us, we die."

Acravis stumbled with a clank of metal and cursed in a low voice. Cola reached her light past him, and Barber caught a glimpse of a huge helical staircase, going down, down. "Let your light dim," she murmured, gripping his fingers and pulling them back gently. The worm lay quiescent; in the pale glow he could only just see the back of the girl's head before him, only just hear Lacomar coming behind, moving with surprising quiet for all his armored bulk.

Stairs. Barber had to feel with his toes for the edge of each next step.

THE GIRL reached back and touched his arm again, so unseen that it made him start. Her other hand, with the worm, was pointing forward, just over Acravis' shoulder, the faint glow reflecting from the side of his helmet. Barber noted that the knight no longer stood a level below, and sure enough, at the next step he found that the stair ended. They were in a passage. Cola kept one hand on his with the lightest of touches, the other guiding Acravis, and Barber, by reaching back, could just link with Sir Lacomar in the same fashion. There was a faint, dull clink from Lacomar's armor, echoed by another from the knight ahead. Then he stopped.

The girl whirled round, soundless and so suddenly that Barber was almost overbalanced, her lips against

his cheek. "Won't hurt you for once, old thing," she breathed voicelessly. "We may—never—again," and her lips sought his and clung to them for a brief, thrilling, perilous moment. There was a snorting chuckle from Lacomar behind, no louder than a snore.

Ahead, the wall was a big and solid door which moved noiselessly at Cola's light push. No light inside. The floor, soft and squeezy between Barber's toes, was obscenely like walking on something's huge tongue.

One step—two, three, four, five, six, and he lost count. Had something moved in the blackness ahead? No—yes; Acravis apparently caught it, too, for he stumbled slightly, pulled back and bumped the girl, sending her caroming into Barber's left arm and shoulder. The sausagelike light worm was almost knocked from his grasp; he recovered it with violent effort and gripped the thing hard. Its light pealed forth in that black place like the sudden blare of a pipe organ.

"No!" came Arvicola's frantic stage whisper. "It is forbidden!" But in the flickering moment before the glow faded, Barber had just time to see what it was had moved.

It was his own reflection in a big mirror; and beneath that mirror on a little shelf lay Titania's crook-handled wand.

He released the worm, which went slithering off into the water, back and forth, and snatched for the wand. As his hand touched it, the glow from Arvicola's light just permitted him to notice what he had not seen before—some lettering, so deeply engrailed into the glass as to be part of its structure. He shoved his face close and read:

> On the pathway you trace
> The face that you face
> Is the median place.

"Come—oh, quick!" said the vole's voice close in his ear; her hand gripped his wrist urgently. The thought struck him that here was another of those mysterious shrines like that in the Kobold caves. He pulled loose, reaching for the mirror with the tip of the wand.

A violent electric shock ran up his arm and all through him. Before he could analyze it there was a clank of armor. He caught the flickering reflection of Acravis' blade, heard him pant with effort once. Then he vanished. In the place where he had been, in the glow of the swimming worm, was a new, deeper darkness; a shapeless something that almost filled that side of the chamber, with two expressionless eyes that reflected.

At that same instant there came to Barber's ears a deafening gurgle of water; stinging wetness in his eyes and nostrils, crushing pressure on his chest. He saw only vaguely that Arvicola was flashing past, heard her shout, "Fred—oh, Fred!" in a voice that trailed off into an agonized scream as the blackness wrapped round her. He tried to swing the anlace, opened his mouth to shout, found it suddenly filled with water and himself strangling, choking, desperate for air; struck out frantically, and felt himself rising, up—up, toward a pinpoint of light above. The last glimpse was of Sir Lacomar, hewing away two-handed in the direction of those lidless eyes, and then he was swimming.

His head broke surface. He tried to take a deep breath and burst into a violent spasm of coughing that brought up a pint of water before he got, at long last, his precious gulp of air. Too weak to do more than dog paddle, he propelled himself feebly toward the shore.

The bright moon of Fairyland was above, picking out around him a little river that wound among tree-lined banks. The scene was cousin-german to that he had left, how long ago?—for the dive that had turned him into a frog. He was no frog now. As a frog you did not choke in water; you could really swim. No; frog, man, or whatever he was, he could forget that half-formed thought of diving back to Arvicola's rescue. He had gone through another metamorphosis, a shaping, as these Fairylanders called it. There was no turning back ever.

Something was attached to his back, hampering him grievously. His knee bumped bottom, and he almost sprawled, but managed to crawl the rest of the way, dripping. He was surprised as he touched dry earth to find he was still holding Titania's wand. He almost collapsed, but the thing attached to his back brought him up and made him look over his shoulder.

The bumps that had been on his back at Oberon's palace and had grown so astonishingly in the Kobold Caves had sprouted full. He had a well-developed pair of wings, springing from the lower ends of his shoulder blades. And the effort to stretch one of them out for inspection told him that he also possessed the necessary structure of bone and muscle to work them. The effort ended in a gasp as the wings stood fully spread and revealed.

They were bat wings.

XV.

THE WAND was still clutched in his hand. For a moment or two he gazed at it, only half comprehending its import in the wave of revulsion and self-hatred that swept over him. Bat wings; that explained it. He had turned, or turned himself, into some kind of willy-nilly devil, condemned to bring evil to everyone he touched.

For that was the only possible explanation of the chain of disasters that followed his actions. If it had not been for his willful insistence on venturing to Hirudia, Arvicola might have lived out her carefree existence. And the doughty but dim-witted crawfish knights—they might have come through then, but for his carelessness with the light. He thought again of the girl's appeal for help, which he had so ill answered, and for one wild moment contemplated diving into the pool again. Dead leeches were afloat on its surface, unpleasantly breaking the moonlight ripple. No; down there he would be a man again, and they crawfish and leech

and vole. He had gone through the metamorphosis, was a God to the water world now, and like most Gods, of limited and negative powers, without capacity for helping those he liked. One could only carry on toward disaster for the other inhabitants of this unreasonable world. He thought of Noah Fawcett and his declining stock of iron tools; had brought the kobolds to ruin, too, though they probably deserved it. Even the wood sprite, Malacea—

"I knew, I knew," said a voice. "Who dares say I cannot see tomorrow? Even beneath that great beard I knew."

Barber jumped a foot, sat down on the tails of his own wings, jumped up again to flap them, and the next moment found himself scrambling and clinging among the branches overhead. That sugary accent could belong only to the girl he had just been thinking about. He looked down; sure enough, there she was, arms outstretched and gazing at him. He wrapped the wings about him, suddenly conscious of the nudity to which he had given no attention while a frog, and hunched on the limb like a gargoyle.

She trilled laughter at him, then in a breath turned serious: "I crave pardon," she cried, "for forgetting that laughter makes you mortals angry. If it be within your rules of conduct to forgive the fault without penalty, I beg you, do; if not, I'll gladly bear whatever you put upon me."

A reply seemed in order. "I don't want to put anything on you," said Barber sensibly. "I want my clothes, to put on me."

Her eyes narrowed calculatingly, and she flung up one hand. "Stupid that I am to forget mortals are under no laws compelling conduct but those they impose on themselves! Yet how am I to serve you in this? I have not hid them."

"No, but—" began Barber, and stopped, embarrassed at showing embarrassment before this child of nature.

"But they're near and you'd be solitary to put them on—is that it? Poor mortal, I suppose that is your modesty, clinging like a remnant of the world you came from. Discard it; we are each other's fate, you and I, and in this land of Fairy, hiding from such fate is presumption."

She was certainly speaking the truth, but Barber hoped only the truth as she understood it. The thought of this full-bosomed and cloying wench after Cola made him shudder. "All the same, I want my clothes," he said obstinately.

She spun around, moving her hands in and out; then, fixing like a pointer dog, she took a dozen steps and stooped at a clump of fern. She lifted something triumphantly—Barber could make out the flash of color that would be his clothes—but the next instant staggered back and dropped it with a little shriek. "The metal! It burns! O, lovely mortal, help me!"

It would have taken an ox to be impervious to that appeal. Barber spread his wings and parachuted down beside her, pulling her away from contact with the sword which had caused the trouble. The cry was no phony on Malacea's part; a six-inch gash with singed edges showed in the filmy material of her dress, and beneath it, the forearm bore a long, angry welt.

As Barber looked at it, she pushed herself up to a sitting posture and flung the other arm around his neck. "Damn it!" he said, trying to push her away. "Malacea, you're a woman of one idea."

"And that idea old. But not stale; they say the world still has a use for it.

> "Come live with me and be my love,
> And we will all the pleasures prove—"

"I might be glad to if I didn't have other business and weren't afraid your boy friend, the Plum, might find us together again."

"Oh, you need fear him no longer."

"I know it. I ate some of his fruit."

"He has escaped that spell. He gave your wand to some wizard of the pool—the Base One, the Under One, I am not sure of his name—and received an enchantment in exchange, to free him from the power of those who had eaten his fruit. I meant rather than you can handle the metal. With that"—she pointed at the sword and he felt her shudder slightly—"at the door of my place, he can never enter. We can love night long and fearless."

"And in the day you'd have to go to your tree. It isn't logical."

"What does that mean? A magic word?"

"No, it means according to the laws of consistent reasoning. Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other, nothing can be both true and false, and two and two make four."

"A mortal word; and like most such, not true."

"Oh, but it is." Barber disengaged himself and picked up four pebbles, two in each hand. "Look," he said. "Two!" and then opened the other hand to show the others. "Two!" He clapped the two hands together and opened them again. "Four!"

"No," said Malacea.

Barber looked and gaped. His opened hands held five pebbles.

It might have been an accident, or she might have dropped one in. He tossed away the extra stone, shut both hands resolutely, and clapped them together again.

"Now will you admit there are four?" he demanded belligerently.

"No," said Malacea. She was right. There were eight pebbles, but this time the tree sprite did not laugh.

"My love and fate," she said, laying a hand on his arm, "let me beg you, once for all, to lay aside those stiff mortal thoughts. There's no living in a country, or a world, but by its laws. There have been mortals here that could not. They wander like sad shadows till some accident pitches them back to their sty, or turn to mere walking vegetables, like one who keeps a farm near here and whom you have doubtless seen. But this time it is more than a little important, and

not to me alone, though you are my very dear; for we of *the* forest can often see hidden things, and I swear by my life that of all who have ever come here, you are the nearest to fulfilling the prophecy. If you but hold to the true line."

"What prophecy? And what is the true line?"

"Why, the prophecy of the redbeard that shall mean life and grace to us all! Look, you have the wand and the redbeard and the power of metal! And for the true line, that is no more than to hold straight to the task in the face of all impediments."

Barber's hand flew to his chin. He was aware that his beard had grown since his experience in the water world, but the touch showed him how surprisingly it had spread into the great chest mattress of a nineteenth century patriarch, and it was red, all right, the end strands showing an unbelievable brick color.

"But look here," he said, "haven't you just furnished me with the best possible argument against staying with you? How can I stick to the task, whatever it is, and go off with you, too?"

Her eyes suddenly stared into vacancy, and her voice went to a whisper. "It's true," she said slowly, "true. I might have known that to set my love on one of the great ones would be to share his hard rule of achievement before enjoyment. Go, then." She gave him a little push with the flat of her hand, and Barber felt as though he had struck a child. "Go and tell your new love that Malacea, the dryad, sends her hate. No, wait. At least, you shall kiss my arm that you burned with your metal and make it well."

She held it out, and Barber obediently kissed the place where the burn was now swelling to blister. Somewhat to his surprise, it immediately became as smooth—and as semitransparent—as the other arm.

He turned to his clothes and began to pull them on. Malacea had turned her back to him resolutely, and did not look round, even when he was, with some difficulty, buttoning the jacket around the bases of his wings. As he stood on tiptoe before leaping away into flight he could see that her head had sunk forward and her shoulders were shaken with sobs.

With each powerful stroke his big new pectoral muscles bulged out the front of his jacket. He cleared the trees easily and straightened away in level flight across the forest through which he had toiled on foot. Bat wings might not be pretty, but they were certainly efficient about getting one over territory. Barber did a loop and a couple of barrel rolls just for the hell of it, and zoomed along, savoring the pleasure of this new physical motion, all his depression fled. So he was near to fulfilling the prophecy of the redbeard, was he? What prophecy? Everyone seemed to know of it; there was that tune Malacea and then Arvicola had sung—devilish odd, now that he thought of it, that denizens of such different worlds should have the same air and same words. There had been something about a redbeard, too, on that big tomb in the graveless graveyard, the one that bore the same strange heraldic design as the door in the Kobold Caverns.

It all tied together somehow and somewhere. Barber experienced the maddening sense that comes just before the climax of a good detective story, of having all the clues laid out before him, but being unable to interpret them into a meaningful pattern. Perhaps they never would make sense in this impossible cosmos. He thought of the pebbles, and, clapping his wings behind his back in irritation, did a fifteen-foot drop.

Long, black, striding shadows beneath hinted of moonset, and he guessed it must be near dawn, till he remembered Malacea's counsel to forget his imported habits of thought. But what time was it, then—or since time appeared a matter of no consequence, which way lay Oberon's palace? He flapped and soared easily—the motion was no more difficult than walking—while he considered the question. A thin haze of cirrus diluted the moonlight above him; neither Fawcett's farm nor the Kobold Hills were visible.

But wasn't there something moving up there to his right? He spiraled toward it.

As he approached, the vision resolved itself into a small female sprite sailing nonchalantly along on gauzy wings.

"Beg pardon," Barber called up, "could you—"

"Why, 'tis the king's new changeling!" she cried. "And alate—not to mention barbed like a centaur. Well met! What's toward?"

"Why, I'd like to find my way to the palace—"

"There to cozen more fays with unmeant gambits in the game of love, I'll be bound." She laughed at him and did a couple of butterfly flipflops.

"No— Say, aren't you the girl who was in Oberon's apartment when Titania came home?"

"Nay, not I; 'twas no more than one of our band—Idalia. But if you think to hold matters secret in Fairyland, Sir Changeling, let me undeceive you. The very trees are sib to all that stirs. How else would I know that you're but newly come from the embrace of the apple sprite, Malacea?"

Barber wondered if his flush was visible in the moonlight and on the wing. "I assure you, I—"

"Come, sir, no hoity-toity manners; the whole matter's exposed. The world knows that your conscience is clear enough—which swinish commodity you seem to value highly, being mortal—but I cannot say as much for your courtesy."

"But look here, do you mean to tell me that everyone knows everything that happens to everyone else?"

"To be sure, witling, insofar as they are interested enough to discover."

"Then Queen Titania knew all the time that Oberon had this Idalia at the palace?"

"She were marvelously less than the Queen's Resplendency did she not."

"Then why didn't she make a fuss when she came in? And why was it necessary for me to get Idalia out of there so fast? Sounds like Dinkelspiel to me."

"Soft, soft, you'd choke the goose to death to make

him cough eggs from 's crop. Why, as to take your first question first, since it holds the nub of the matter —because she could not; the laws of conduct forbade, there being no trace of Cousin Idalia within the apartment."

"Oh." Barber digested that for a moment, flying along beside her, and reflecting that he had heard something of the kind before. "Very convenient laws. Who makes them?"

The fay went off into a long peal of laughter, soft in the un-echoing sky. "Makes 'em? Why, child, they're laws natural and were made with the world—Stay, I do forget you're of mortal kindred, who live by other rules. Tell me, is it good fact, as some say, that in the land you came from all the dumb world follows an immutable procession, as the sun arriving punctually on hour or the seed producing nought but the tree that bore it?"

"Why, certainly."

"Even so the laws of conduct. When I laughed but now had you laughed with me, we must have spent half the night tumbling and playing awing through these light airs. For we have too much in us of the light elements, Fire and Air, to be restrained from joy by the troubles of the earthbound court."

"What's wrong with the court?"

"What's not? The worst and heaviest of all the shapings; all's confusion, and the King's Radiance fears some deadly doom. And so, farewell; I'm for a new master."

"Wait a second!" cried Barber. "I'd like to get to the palace, and I'd like still more to see you again. How do I go about it?"

"Ask the wind—or your Malacea." And off she went, at a speed he could not match.

XVI.

That left the question of which direction he should take pretty much in the air, Barber thought, wishing there were someone around to appreciate the pun. If the fay were bound away from the court, it would not do to follow her; and from what he had learned of the singular geography of Fairyland, it seemed probable that if he followed her backtrack he would reach some very interesting place, but not the one he was looking for. He must think in terms of his environment—"lay aside those stiff mortal thoughts," as Malacea had advised. What would a Fairylander do?

Use the wand, he answered himself, letting it slide from his hand. It fell, not straight down, but sliding and twisting down an invisible gradient like a falling leaf, as though trying to hold itself in one direction. Barber did a power dive in time to catch it before it reached the treetops and slanted up again, holding the loop of the wand loosely in a crooked forefinger. "All right," he ordered it, "suppose you show me the way."

The wand thrust itself out, flatly horizontal, and Barber flew in the direction indicated. Beneath him, the forest began to thin out into clumps and groves, then wore away into a rolling plain, with only a tree here and there, black in the waxing light. Now outcroppings of rock began to jut through the grass of the plain, growing in size and frequency till Barber found himself flying low over a rugged crag country, which presently sprang up in peaks as angular as the mountains of the moon. Not a sign of the smooth park land and monstrous potted trees that he remembered.

Off ahead the sky was lightening. The country below, now all gorge and precipice, threw up a tor with scarred sides across his line of flight. On its top, black against the Prussian-blue gloom that precedes sunrise, stood something too regular in outline to be the work of nature: a castle—ugly and squat in outline, with thick, unpierced curtain walls and disproportionately small towers at the angles, like a prison. A Dracula castle—no, that would have the fascination of the weird, something Gothic out of Aubrey Beardsley, while this was as hideous as a factory town. The wand led him straight to it, and as he planed in for a landing at the gate he saw Oberon's blue-and-gold oriflamme hanging listlessly from a staff.

The gate was heavy wood, bound with metal in a finicking and tasteless design. It was locked; there was no answer either to Barber's shout or his hammerings. When he thought of the wand again and applied it, the gate creaked grudgingly just wide enough to let him enter. He found himself in a courtyard with a little dry grass sticking up through cobbles, and the first thing he noticed was the slobbering hobgoblin with overlarge knee joints who had admitted him. The second was Oberon, Titania, and Gosh, coming down the steps of the donjon.

As they crossed the bailey Barber had time to note that if he had changed during his journey, there was still more pronounced a changed in them, and all for the worse. Oberon looked older and balder, with a hunched and gnarled appearance hard to put a name to; one of those things you were sure you saw till you looked straight at it, when it vanished. Titania's pale glory of complexion had become a dead-white, the ruffles at her neck were a little askew, and the gold broidery of her sleeves tarnished. The good-natured impishness of Gosh's face had given way to a fixed malignant sneer, as though he could not wait to grow up into a ruffian and a killer.

And as with master, so with man. The train that followed the royal pair was an assemblage of crapulous horrors, not a winged fairy in the crew. Some limped, some had Gargantuan hands or chins, some tails, and all deformities. Barber recognized Imponens with difficulty; the acrobatic philosopher was hobbling along on a cane, with the corners of his mouth drawn down, and only just lifted his foot out of the way as a huge centipede scuttled from under the feet of another of the crew.

The king stretched out his neck and scrooged up his eyes, peering at Barber as though he could not see well. "No, tell me not," he said. "Memory's as good as ever,

a faculty independent of mutations, which does not decay. Ha, I have it—you're the latest changeling, Barber!"

"Just back from the Kobold Hills, at your service, and reporting complete success." He managed a salute with the wand. Around the king, the court burst into squeaks and murmurs, and Oberon almost smiled.

"Well done, then; you have our favor. Success were needed at this pass, sorely needed. Even a tiny gobbet goes far to restore our joy."

"Joy is but the absence of pain," croaked Imponens, but Barber had already begun with: "Is this your new palace?"

"Aye," said Oberon, "though we had not the planning of't. Come, we'll change tales and wring each other's vitals." He reached out to take Barber's arm and lead him toward the frowning keep, then drew back. "You have the metal about you. Leave it by the gate, Barber fellow; 'twill at least be some barrier to the bugs and bewitchings that now do plague us."

Barber put his sword just inside the gate as directed and followed the king. Within the castle their footsteps went echoing through great passages of undressed stone, taller than those of the Kobold Caverns, but almost as dank. There were spider webs everywhere, and insects crawling about. When they came to a great hall whose walls bore faded and moldering tapestries, Oberon dismissed the court with a word and led on, up a circular staircase to the battlements. The dawn light was growing and a chill wind had come up with it, that wrenched at their bodies as Barber told his story.

"So she saw in you the destined redbeard," said Oberon when he had finished. "'Tis a thing to think on; must ask Imponens, whose counsel in such affairs is never less than good, though somewhat vinegared with pessimism of late. Yet it could be, and being solve the sorrows of—"

Something hit Barber violently in the back, tumbling him right through one of the crenels in the battlement. He had one glimpse of young Gosh's snarling face, heard Oberon's startled shout, and the wind was whistled past as the toothlike rocks below swam up to receive him.

There was a heart-stopping instant of terror before Barber remembered and spread his wings. They bore; he leveled out in a long, sweeping catenary, and beat his way back to the parapet. Oberon was trying to get at the boy, who was wrapping himself in Titania's skirts for protection. Barber made a quick estimate of speed, distance, and windage, fluttered his wings twice for altitude, and glided in.

Gosh saw him coming and left his hiding place to run. Barber swooped in and swung the wand with both hands like a bat, to bring it across the boy's shoulders. If it broke every bone in the young imp's body, he would be only too pleased.

The wand met only the slightest resistance. Then Gosh was not there, and Barber, thrown off balance by the strength of his own blow, swept into a stumbling landing.

"Whither went he?" cried Titania. "You villain, you puling thrip, if you've destroyed him, I'll—"

"You'll do precisely nothing, madam," Oberon cut in. "An' he were destroyed, 'twere a bad world rid of worse rubbish, but 'tis not so. There he stands, by power of the wand and 's own character given his proper form at last."

He pointed to the battlement beside Titania. The others saw a crocodile about a foot and a half long, which opened its jaws to emit a faint "Urk!" and started across the paving at a brisk, clockworky waddle.

Titania snatched up the reptile. "Poor Chandra!" she said, contriving in some odd manner to be both pathetic and ridiculous without losing her queenliness. "Oh, I could smile to see them die that bring these shapings on us!" She coddled the thing in her arms like a baby, and Barber was surprised to see two big tears oozing from its eyes along its scaly face. "I—" began Titania, when the memory of a legend clicked in Barber's brain. Absurd where he came from, it was probably true here.

"Drop it, quick!" he shouted. "It's going to bite!"

Titania did not quite drop the crocodile, but as she jerked it away its teeth met with a snap, half an inch from her nose. "Gramercy for your warning, philosophic Barber," she said.

Barber bowed: "If I may offer a suggestion to Your Resplendency, you can keep your little playmate very comfortable till he gets his shape back by putting him in a pan with water and a rock he can crawl out on. Your Resplendency can feed him once or twice a week on chopped raw meat."

Titania gazed at him suspiciously for a moment, then said: "I'll do it, straight." She hurried for the stairs, holding her pet at arm's length, with its legs revolving. Oberon chuckled; Barber somehow could not find her distress very funny.

But the king was plucking him by the sleeve. "We've matters of state to confer on," he said. "Harkee, good Barber, I do count you a true man."

"I hope—"

"Tush, take it not amiss; we're surrounded by treacheries in these evil times. Why, the very cocking wenches play at Judas— Hold, where were we? I have't; these villain shapings—secret of statecraft is let nought distract—" His voice trailed off and he paced the paving, hands behind back, wagging his head to and fro. Then he turned and gripped Barber hard by both elbows.

"I'm in some sort an usurper," he declared fiercely. "Make the worst of it; say I seized the throne and the lady. She loved me true and I her; we mutually do still, I swear it. Will you hold me the less for that?"

"Why, no, of course not," said Barber, mystified, but supposing this was what he ought to reply.

"Well, then, what would you? My lady's gay and lives for pleasure in herself and those about her. Under her regiment we had a realm here like your own mortal world in its laws physical, save for slight changes such as lacking the power of iron. Look how yon bat sails widdershins around that tower—another presage of disaster!" He flung out an arm to point, then turned to Barber again:

"So it was all gaiety, high pleasure, and good converse at court, but beyond it, misery—slayings and black magic, hideous things done, as you have traces of among your own people. Is't not so, you've heard some tale how they met on a mountain with bloody rites?"

"Like voodoo or the Walpurgis Night?"

"Aye, and they're good history of the black days ere I wedded Titania and 'stablished a new sovereignty. But these anarchies and nightmares, I put them down with the strong arm—I. With the aid of Sylvester and the giving of my heart's best blood I made a great conjuring that may not be repeated; set the laws fundamental of this realm so that happiness should be our constant companion. 'Twas not enough; there are those whose only happiness lies in their own aggrandizement."

He stopped and looked out across the waste of rock. The sun had reached the horizon now and was throwing level ruddy beams across pillar and buttress and spire, but it drew no answering fire from those heartless cold pitches of frozen lava. They lay inert, highlights and shadows alike gray and deadly. Barber cleared his throat. "Do you mean those laws of conduct I've heard about? I wish—"

"Aye. Conduct. There's the key—would you not say? Sylvester and I, we sublimated in a manner the laws natural to these others, so that none could give joy, for example, without receiving it in turn—set a rein on all furious passions. Mistake." He turned and gripped Barber by the arm again. "Good Barber, will you make alliance with an old man and old king whose web is near spun?"

"What, me? Why? I thought I was working for you, sir. What—"

"So, let it slip." Oberon passed a hand across his forehead as though to brush something away. "I had not meant to ask you so early. Let it slip; my mind is all adossed. We'll to bed and treat with Imponens present, who can see deeper into a millstone than most."

He led the way to the stairs and whistled for a servant. The one who came had the big head and pop eyes of an idiot, and teeth that hung over his lower lip. He breathed with his mouth, blowing little bubbles.

The room to which this creature led Barber was tall, but narrow, with a single high window and rusty damp streaks down the walls. The bed was hard, and Barber, who had never tried to sleep in wings before, found such difficulty in arranging his limbs that he had no more than closed eyes when he was awakened by a strident "Krawk!" He looked up to see a big black bird on the window sill with moonbeams streaming past it. Somewhere below in the castle a bell was tolling with muffled, slow persistence.

Barber's head ached and his mouth held a taste like

the hangover from a three-day drunk, but there seemed little use in trying to sleep any more, as both bird and bell kept up their noise. He dressed in a foul mood. "Krawk!" said the bird as he handled each garment, cocking its head on one side and inspecting him. He thought of flying up and shooing it away, but the room was hardly wide enough for the spread of his wings. He compromised by yelling "Beat it!" and went down to the hall.

Oberon and Titania were seated at breakfast as in that other hall, but there were no winged fairies visible, and the correct frog footmen had disappeared. Instead, there was a throng of the exaggerated people he had seen the night before; they stumbled over one another trying to serve the king and queen, and the bell in the background donged steadily. The king looked up at Barber's entrance.

"A chair of pretense, ho! for Barber!" he called, and motioned to a place by his right at the table. It was forthcoming after a little commotion. Barber sat down to a breakfast whose flavor was not improved by the sight of a pair of cockroaches holding a conference in the center of the table. Oberon waited courteously enough till he pushed away his plate.

"Now let's to business," the king said. "Here be deep matters. A weird lies on us—implacable, no escape within our"—his eye caught the cockroaches—"within our—faugh! what foulness! Imponens, unriddle this matter for our good cousin, Barber. What is't we wish to say?"

"Doubtless that we gave ourselves to delight while the enemy to strivings, Your Radiance. But 'twill not mend a broken bone to see where it's fractured."

"Pox on your counsel of despair. Are we dogs to lick in gratitude the punishing hand? No: we're as foul as those that challenge this fair land an' we not challenge them in turn."

"But, Your Radiance, we lack the power—" Imponens began to protest, but Oberon cut him short.

"And have we not here one that possesses all means needful? Our Barber, our war duke and champion, who'll not be bound by—"

Titania cleared her throat. "My lord," she said, "you do but rant and wander from the purpose. Look, Barber, here's what he would say, these witcheries my lord king put down when we were united, they have made a great resurgence."

Barber managed to get a word in edgewise. "Will you pardon me if I say I don't understand? Who are you talking about? Who's responsible for these troubles?"

There was a silence. Titania and Oberon looked at each other, and it was the brownie philosopher who finally spoke: "You pose, Sir Barber, the question of the ages, one ineluctable. For if I answer in detail: the Kobolds, then you are well answered, since those cattle did grievously vex this realm in ancient days, and you yourself are but come from hindering a new vexation. Yet, 'twill not be the Kobolds, neither; for their two excursions are separated by so wide a gap as memory can barely bridge, and in that interval they have been the best of subjects and citizens, cheerful, apt to every task, and I make no doubt will be again, now that you have knocked down their high pretensions.

"Shall I say the fays, then, for deserting the court? Nay; they're lighthearted aërial creatures who give and receive pleasure, will be a joy wherever the laws of Oberon run.

"Those who bring these shapings on us? At the moment, my art tells me it may be those Princes of the Ice which erst were our good friends and well-wishers. Yet if they be destroyed their ambition will but pass to other hands and in the end be unconquerable. What boots it, then, to struggle—"

Titania rapped sharply on the table with her knife. "I'll not hear such traitorous doctrine!" she cried. "Give him no thought, Barber; we live in today and not i' the ages, whereas 'tis every philosopher's maggot to imagine himself thinking for eternity. Here's the present problem: someone, it may be those Princes of the Ice our lick-pudding counselor thinks, has found the gap in the laws that guard this land. By constitution its physical forms are somewhat unstable; well then, these enemies who seek to rule raise spells to produce shapings and still more, till our whole surrounding is gone hideous. Our joy fled with the fays who cannot bear such ugliness; they hope to cramp us and drive us with unpalatable circumstance till we even break our own laws of conduct, the reign slip from our hands, which they hope to seize."

"And what if they did?"

"Our death, perhaps; but in any case the tempestuous anarch disorder which my very dear lord and king saved us from so long gone. This is what you must keep us from now, good Barber."

Fred Barber sat back in his chair of pretense and looked from king to queen. The picture was becoming clearer, but:

"Why must it be me? What's the matter with Oberon?"

"My own cursed laws!" The king brought his fist down on the table. "They hold for all—no violences. Do I break 'em, I've let in the forbidden thing, we have the old days back. Yet here's a scoundrelism will hear no argument but sharps."

"I may be awfully dense, but again, why pick on me?"

"Why you're the redbeard! You come of a hard race, have the iron I left out of my laws; must do it in any case, and why not the sooner." He sang, to the same tune Malacea and Cola had used:

"When the redbeard comes again,
Then shall fairies turn to men.
When he touches the three places
He shall know them by their faces."

As Oberon chanted the absurd verse a sense of excitement invaded Barber. Once more he seemed on the edge of something he could not quite grasp, but now

it was something splendid and promising as the discovery of a new world. Almost without realizing what he was doing, he stood up and clapped the great wings together behind his back. All the people in the hall gave a shout; Oberon and Titania stood up, too, and the king extended his hand:

"Go, then, Barber. You are our stay and alliance as iron must cover and protect gold, however precious and desirable the latter be."

XVII.

YES, but go where?

The exaltation lasted till he had reached the castle gate, picked up his sword, and was winging out across the sea of rock through clear moonlight. He had not thought of asking directions, and it occurred to him that it would have done no good to ask. The people of the court would have answered quite honestly that they did not know. It was useless to expect from them precision in any physical or material statement.

Which way?

He had begun by flying around the castle in an Archimedian spiral, ever-widening. Beneath, the tumbled rocks gave no sign of life, nothing that might be a guide. Even the distant horizon failed to show that gradation where the mountain-country broke down to the craggy moors over which he had sailed the previous evening. He reflected that this would have sent him into something like a panic a week before; now it merely afforded some faint amusement as he sailed along on tireless wings, now and again experimenting with the subtle pleasure of gliding.

A sharp hiss in the air over his head caused him to look up. He had a glimpse of something large and black dropping on him out of the blue; then gathered himself for a powerful wing beat to carry him out of its way. In mid-stroke a terrific blow smote him, great curved talons dug through the back of his trunks, and came out with a rending of cloth as Barber put full power into his wing beat.

He banked, fumbling for the kobold sword, and trying to bring the attacker into vision. A hiss of feathers overhead accompanied by a second cry from the raven gave him momentary warning again, and he put strength into a drive forward and up. The change of pace threw his attacker more wildly off, but something slashed down a calf muscle. As he felt his hose turn warm with blood another bank gave him a view of these attackers, now below and beating up toward him.

They were giant black eagles, almost as big as he was, and a second glance showed him that each had two well-developed heads. One of them was, in fact, snapping and striking with one head at the raven which swooped over it, while the other head spied for direction. But it was only a glimpse; the warning hiss sounded again and Barber jerked frantically sidewise to dodge the strike of a third eagle. The tip of a black wing caught him a dizzying blow on the side of the head, knocking off his plumed hat.

He made a quick estimate of the distance between himself and the rocks, then threw himself on his back to see where these heraldic monstrosities were coming from. At first he could make out nothing; then he spotted two more, almost exactly between him and the moon. One was diving, close enough to grow visibly in size as he watched, but not diving at him, for beneath the stroke Barber saw moon-reflection from the glossy black of another raven. The bird avoided; there was a flurry of motion as the eagle checked and the two ramped against each other, their battle cries thinned by distance. Then the second eagle half-folded its wings and came in on Barber.

TWO COULD PLAY at that game, he thought, flipping over into normal flying position and dropping for the mountain crests. Wind whistled through his hair in ascending pitch. Behind he heard a high, piercing screech, the sound of a rusty hinge. It had a distinct warble; no doubt, thought Barber, the heterodyning effect of a slight difference in pitch between the two larynxes belonging to a single eagle.

The top of a mountain grew at him, jagged and formidable. He spread and leveled off, with the strain tearing at his pectoral muscles. The horrible thought came to him that he'd miscalculated, he'd crash, didn't have strength enough to pull out of the dive.

Then the mountaintop drove past. He was still going down, but down a slope, and a twig tip slashed across the back of his right hand. At his hundred-mile-an-hour speed it stung like a whip and left a little line of emergent blood drops.

A glance showed that the eagle above had pulled up sooner than himself and was now joined by one of those that had attacked at first. Far off, another was engaged with one of the friendly ravens and seemed to be winning, for the smaller bird was only trying to beat off the attack and get away. Before he could make up his mind to do anything about it the two eagles above became three—five—six; they tipped over and came plummeting down at him with nerve-shattering screams.

Barber, cocking his head this way and that, dodged like the bat whose wings he bore. A claw touched his cheek. He tacked frantically; a wing struck one of his own, half-numbing it and sending him tumbling. As he forced the painful member to pump a victory scream sounded from behind, probably over one of the ravens, he thought angrily, and put on speed.

The eagles had shot past, low over the valley. Now they swirled up in a cloud and sorted themselves into a diagonal line, like geese. Three more swam up out of nowhere and attached themselves to the end of the line, and they came toward him, all nine pairs of wings flapping in synchronism. Their intention was obvious. With a jar Barber realized that those predatory double heads held brains enough for intelligent combination. One or two he could dodge, but nine, diving in quick succession, would get him sure.

He flew at utmost speed for a few moments, then came round in a sweeping circle to see whether they

would follow if he affected to give up the direction he had chosen. They did; the hostility was implacable then, related to his existence and not his movements. There was nothing to do but fight them. Remembering a quotation from Kipling to the effect that a savage attacked was much less dangerous than a savage attacking, he pivoted on easy wings and slanted upward, whipping out the sword.

The eagle formation—another had joined it now—came up with him, holding the same strict alignment, but with the birds craning their doubled necks and screeching at each other, as though in perplexity. Barber felt a momentary thrill of gratification. He suspected that although the monsters were capable of plan, they lacked mental flexibility, the capacity to meet an unforeseen situation. He could climb faster, too, with his wide wingspread and better balance; he was past and gaining, the formation went a little uncertain, and he peeled off into an almost vertical drop.

The sword arm came down with the added motion of his descent, taking one of them where wing joined body, and Barber shouted with delight as he felt the blade bite through. The eagle went spinning and screeching downward; Barber gave one swift wing stroke and brought his sword up backhand onto the neck of the next in line. One head flew from the body, the other head squeaked and the eagle began to fly in a zany circle. Another swing sent one tumbling in a tangle of feathers, and the formation broke up, eagles spreading in all directions.

Barber pursued one, caught it and killed it with a blow. Kipling was right, and the things were practically helpless against attack from above. He went into a long glide to gain distance, looking for, but seeing no sign of the ravens. They must have been finished off, poor birds. In the distance the formation he had broken up was gathering again, and more eagles were coming up, some to reinforce the shattered group, others to form a new one, which immediately began to climb.

Barber drove for altitude, got above them, and dived in, killing several eagles. But the other formation climbed while he was about it and delivered a diving attack; it took both sharp flying and quick sword work to get away unscathed. While he was about it, more eagles came up to join those already on hand; there must be at least twenty-five or thirty not counting those he had got rid of. At this rate they would smother him with mere press of numbers long before the night was done, and he had no assurance that the confounded doubleheaders were not diurnal.

Clearly, this counterattack in the air would get him nowhere in the long run, and equally clearly something better would have to be found soon. The eagles, he observed, all seemed to come from the same direction, and probably belonged to the forces of that mysterious enemy to whom Oberon had referred. Their sudden attack might be on general principles, due to original sin, but the way they had kept after him even when he turned back did not look like it. Neither did their constant multiplication. More likely he was getting too close for comfort to that third place of the Fairyland prophecy.

Too close for the enemy's comfort. He recalled how his touch on the first of those places had put a stop to the kobolds' antisocial activities, and wondered whether there had been any improvement in the tangled and difficult life of the pool since he touched the second. Below him forty-five or fifty double-headed eagles were circling and screaming, spreading to form a network which should be too wide and deep for penetration. He was so high now that the mountains beneath had lost relief and were spread like a flat picture map, with shadows and patches of green for coloring.

Other eagles were coming to join those beneath him, their direction clearly marked from this height. He swooped down a thousand feet or so, and saw the latest comers circle around to join those gathering in a cloud of wings behind him. In addition to the ability to combine efforts, they evidently possessed a good communications system and had passed on word that he was too dangerous an opponent for single-handed attack.

After a while no more eagles seemed to be coming. Barber circled, looking down, and perceived that he was over an exceptionally tall, prominent peak. His eyesight seemed exceptionally good—probably another Fairyland gift, like the wings. Another circle; behind, the eagles were spreading out in a widening crescent to shut him in, methodically and with no indication of haste. A single eagle came soaring up from the shadow of the peak; Barber closed wings, dove and killed it before it knew he was there, noticing as he did so that the shadow from which it had flown held a single spot of iridescent light.

Toward this he flew; as he did so, the flock behind him burst into screams and began to close, overhead as well as on all sides. But he held course and came to a landing on the ledge where the spot was.

It was a ball of some brownish but shiny substance, perhaps a yard in diameter. Barber tapped it with his sword and was instantly rewarded by a chorus of screams from the eagles above. The ball gave off a sharp, dry, wooden sound, and when he swung at it full arm, only moved slightly without breaking. It appeared to be attached to the ledge.

The eagles overhead screamed again, and one swooped at Barber. He struck it down, a neat blow, right between the paired necks. Another dove at him, and, as he dodged, crashed into the rocks and went tumbling a thousand feet down in a cloud of feathers.

A sharp *ping* made Barber look around. The globe had vanished into a haze of golden particles. On the ledge where it had been, sat a new young eagle, shaking dampness from its feathers. It spied Barber and opened its beaks, but he took both heads off with a single sweeping stroke, and dodged another suicidal dash from above.

On the spot where ball and then eagle had been was a circular hole in the ledge, about the size of a broomstick, with a smooth, shiny lip. As Barber watched, with

glances overhead, another sphere appeared at the mouth of this hole and grew like a bubble.

Two more eagles had died in attacks from above when this one reached the size of the first. Barber twice hit it with all his strength and no result. A moment later it shattered. Barber killed the eagle it contained and kicked its carcass off the ledge; a proceeding obviously futile, since a new egg began to grow immediately. The process appeared endless, and there was nothing to plug the hole with, the ledge as bare as a banker's head, and as hard as his heart.

Another eagle swooped from above, and as Barber lowered his sword after cutting down the bird his elbow touched Titania's wand, still stuck through his belt. The very thing! When the next egg dissolved, he rapidly slew the eagle it contained, reached over and, before the new bubble could come forth, rammed the wand in. It went home to a tight fit, and from within the hole came a bubbling tumult like the cooking of a gigantic kettle. But no more balls appeared.

The eagles above burst into such an ear-splitting racket that Barber could hardly hear himself think, and all around him began diving at the cliff in witless frenzy. *Thump! thump!* they landed, bounding off into the black depths below with flying feathers, utterly neglecting Barber in their furious desire for death; and soon there were no more eagles visible, on the ledge or in the sky. The tubelike orifice still gave forth a sound of boiling. Barber did not quite dare to withdraw the wand. After a few minutes' rest he hung his sword at his side and took to wing again.

As he soared above the peak in now-empty air, he noted something unseen before on the far horizon. Not a mountain nor a meadow, it was as tall as the former and wide as the latter, smooth and shining like the roc's egg of Sindbad. Barber flew toward it.

XVIII.

THE roc's egg was ice.

Fred Barber knew it long before he arrived at that glistening and translucent structure by the chill that hung around it, though that chill—strangely, to his senses attuned to another world—brought no mist in the air and the great dome showed no sign of melting. "Princes of the Ice" Oberon had said, and this was doubtless their residence, the central seat of power of that enemy he was arrayed against.

Locked in the heart of the icy dome, distorted by curvature and refraction, was something dark and shapeless. Barber lit near it and shivered for the first time in Fairyland in the constant current of cold air flowing outward. Whatever lay at the heart of that gelid bubble remained ineluctable, for practical purposes invisible, as he walked around, trying to peer in.

Ice. If this were the last, it was also the hardest of his tasks, to try to make something of this outrageous glacier. There was no way of dealing with the damned thing, especially with the wand left behind to plug the hole of the eagle eggs. It was utterly silent, impassive, remote, like death. Not for nothing had Dante had the last and most terrible of his infernal circles an icy one; no wonder Oberon thought the princes of this place his ultimate and deadliest enemy. Barber himself began to experience a sense of depression, of utter futility such as he had seldom experienced. He would a dozen times rather have dealt with the tricky activity of the kobolds, the treacherous violence of Hirudia or even endless swarms of double-headed eagles. There seemed simply nothing he could do to those glasslike walls.

Wait for day and the sun to melt it? It could not be long delayed, the moon was paling to its close, already the stars shone brighter. But no, that held no promise of success. The cold dome came down flush to the ground, with a thin rim of dry grass around it and beyond that meadow, bespeaking the thought that this was no ice he knew but some unreasonable variety that did not melt in the sun.

His teeth were chattering with cold. Perhaps the only way of penetration was the obvious one. He stepped up to the smooth surface at random and swung his sword. It bit deep; great fragments tinkled and clashed away with every stroke. The ice was soft or brittle or both. He marked out with his eye space enough to give him a good tunnel and fell to hewing, the work warming him.

But as the shards broke out and fell away it became apparent that the ice was not homogeneous in quality. A large irregular lump at the heart of the area on which he was working turned the edge of Barber's blade while the material around it shattered and cascaded away. This adamantine lump was something over Barber's own size, and as it took form beneath the undirected sculpture of his sword it became apparent that it was about his own shape.

With a crash of glasslike crystals, ice avalanched away from the lump, leaving it standing in the mouth of the shaft like a snowman in high relief. It was, in fact, exactly a snowman, or better, an iceman, of imposing stature, faceless under a domed glassy headgear, with a club over its shoulder.

And it began to move; sluggishly with creaking ice sounds, detaching itself from the remaining matrix, shifting the club.

BARBER STUMBLED back in alarm, his feet skidding on the unmelted fragments beneath. His sword would not bite, and the wand was far away.

But the creature apparently had no aggressive intentions. After one step it became immobile in its former pose. The starshine shimmered on a film of water, flowing down from some unseen source over the surface and around the ice giant. It froze as it descended, and in a moment or two the surface on which Barber had labored was as smooth as ever. The air was cold.

Barber walked fifty paces around the circle of the wall and began chipping again. The ice broke away with the same ease, and as easily as before did an ice giant, complete with club, emerge. Once more the film of water flowed smoothly down and filled the wound.

Barber stepped close and touched his hand to the current; it was icy-cold and stung like brine in the wounds the twig had made.

He stepped back, grimacing with pain and shaking off the shining drops. As he did so a couple of them fell on the rose in his buttonhole, the double rose he had plucked at the luchrupán's tree. With a faint sissing sound they dissolved into steam.

Barber stepped back to consider, and found that the ends of his now long red beard were covered with tiny particles of rime. Once more he experienced the baffling sense of standing at the edge of discovery, yet somehow lacking the clue that would unlock knowledge. Perhaps the key lay once more in Malacea's injunction to leave his imported habits of thought for those that went with the environment.

But what did that mean in the present case? As a devotee of the mathematically logical approach favored by the newer school of science, he set himself to examine the fundamental assumptions on which he had been working. The first thing that he discovered—somewhat to his own surprise—was that he had been accepting chance as causation. There was something wrong about this; as wrong as his earlier assumption that because the formulas of this existence did not jibe with those he knew, the whole thing was utterly without logic or reason.

Oberon, and still more, Imponens, had given him a glimpse of a Fairyland ruled by laws as definite as any he knew, though of a different order. They related more to matters accepted figuratively or not accepted at all in the world he was accustomed to call "his." Probably astrology and numerology would be exact sciences here. Assuredly, he could reject the idea that mere chance had carried him to the encounters with Malacea or the kobolds or the world under the water. The monkeys would write Shakespeare before such a series could come about by accident.

What he had to do was discover the chain of causation and apply it to the present circumstance, shivering outside that dome of ice beneath a cold sky from which the moon had gone, and only faintly tinged with coming day. *The three places.* It had something to do with that; and he was convinced that the third place lay before him, hidden in that impassive hood of ice. Had the others anything in common; was it possible to establish any series?

Apparently not. The first place lay in the heart of the hills and he had reached it by a toilsome journey on foot; the second, under the pool, and he had attained it by a special adaptation or metamorphosis into a frog. Here was the third, which he hardly could have reached at all without this other special adaptation of wings—Hold on a minute; had not that gauzy-winged fay he met in the skies said something about: "We have in us the light elements, Fire and Air?" Here was series, the series of the Pythagorean elements—Earth for the first place, Water for the second; he had vanquished Air in dealing with those double-headed eagles. Fire would surely be the antidote to the ice that stood before him.

It was at this point that Fred Barber remembered how the icy brine had hissed when it touched his rose. The finding of that flower could be no more chance than the other events of the series.

Fred Barber plucked the rose from his coat and advanced to the wall of ice, holding it in front of him. As far as his fingers could tell it was an ordinary blossom, but when he came near the ice there was a hiss and crackle, and water flowed down in a young torrent, welling out over the grass. A cloud of vapor rose from it.

The rose melted a deep hemispherical pit in the face of the ice dome, and of the iceman who had been there before there was no sign. Barber stepped into the cavity, holding his new weapon before him. Beneath his feet was slippery ice and around them gathered a runnel of coldly steaming water. A step at a time carried him forward into the tunnel he was melting, a passage out of dark into dark, with just the faintest shimmering of rainbow hues where the rising day behind shot a few beams through. All had a bluish cast, as though this were the permanent and natural color of that grim place.

It must have taken half an hour to reach the dark core of that berg, and an uncontrollable fit of shivering had overtaken him, not entirely due to cold. His foot felt an edge; he bent, holding the rose downward, and melted a coating of ice from a granite step, immemorially ancient, and rutted deep with the pressure of many feet. Other steps rose beyond it, a flight down which the melting water cascaded, leading up to a monumental double door of bronze.

When he had cleared the ice from it by use of the rose Barber perceived that the door bore a coat of arms—the same, with crowns and double-headed eagles that he had now seen twice before. But this time it was partly overlaid with a more recent plate in plain brass, into which lettering had been deeply incised. Barber bent to examine it in the tricky, pulsing light that came through the ice from the gathering day:

This is the veritable Wartburg. Let him enter who has a high heart and the four elemental spells; but not unless he can bear the eyes of the Redbeard.

There was something strange about that inscription, but not until he had already laid hand on the door to push it open did Barber realize that neither letters nor words had been English. They were old German, a language he did not know—or did he? The building itself had a curious mental atmosphere, as though it possessed a memory of its own, independent of his, and were trying to communicate with him, tell him a great and happy secret. He pushed the door.

It opened slowly, with a musical tinkle of unmelted ice from the hinges. He was in a hall, high, wide and deep, blue-dim at the far end, pale-blue along the high windows between the dark uprights. A huge table ran its whole length, a table in white streaked stone that would be marble. At the near end a figure was seated with its back to Barber, in a chair of horn, curiously mosaiced together. The figure was wearing a dark robe

and a tall, conical hat, dark-blue and sprinkled with stars.

As Barber came level with him, he perceived this individual was leaning forward with his elbows on the table and his chin cupped in his hands. A beard lay on the table; the face above it was that of Imponeus or any other learned doctor in philosophy, with wide-open eyes staring straight ahead. But he did not answer when Barber spoke and shook his shoulder, and the body beneath the robe felt cold.

Barber shuddered slightly and went on down the hall, wondering whether he heard a noise behind him. Toward the far end his eyes focused on the figures there. For there were many—a whole row of boys standing against the farther wall, clad in medieval page costumes and with hair to their shoulders, staring stiffly before them like the man in the conical hat. Barber noted that the line had one gap; but what caught and held his eye was the figure in front of the gap.

For this figure also occupied a seat at the table, but the seat was a great carved ivory throne, sweeping up in tall lines to carved double-headed eagles on the pillars at the back. The man himself was leaned forward in an attitude of sleep, his forehead on one arm and chin on the table, and a tall crown of mingled gold and iron, set with jewels, had rolled from his head. All around face and arm lay a great mat of beard, and deeper still, seeming to pass right into the substance of the table itself; and even in that dimness Barber could see that it was red.

A thrill of passionate expectancy, as though he were on the threshold of something at once splendid and terrible, ran through him. He stepped to the table and saw, just beyond the extended fingers, a brass plate let into its top. (Was that a sound again behind him?) Straining his eyes Barber bent close and read:

> He shall gain the triple grace
> Who reaches this as the third place.

Clomp.

Barber whirled. Icemen, faceless and menacing, their clubs held aloft, were flooding through the doorway by which he had entered. They deployed into a line across the hall, both sides of the table, and came marching down with ice-creaking steps, ponderous and irresistible.

Barber snatched for the kobold sword, remembered it would not bite on their hardness. The rose? He was surprised to discover it was no longer in his hand; he must have dropped it at the door or when he shook the shoulder of that figure at the other end of the table. For a moment panic jarred through him; then he perceived that the terrible regiment bearing down on him had a gap in its line, the gap caused by the table itself.

He leaped for the table top, and in the very moment of the leap saw a figure at the door behind the icemen; the single page boy missing from the line. The lad's high voice cried: "Time is! The ravens fly no more!" and then Barber's foot touched the brazen plate that was the third place.

It seemed to go right through; he had a sensation of floating disembodied into nothingness. There was a rending crash; the ice without the castle split and shivered away, and a bright new golden sun came streaming in all the windows of that hall, and—

Frederick Barbarossa, that was Fred Barber, gripped the arms of the ivory throne and stood upright. There was a tug at his chin; the marble table split and its halves toppled to side and side with a booming crash.

"Where is the enemy?" he demanded, and looked around on icemen that were icemen no longer, but knights and barons in shining mail with swords in hand and a few drops of water shining like jewels on them in the new light.

But that philosopher from the lower end of the table stretched his arms and answered:

"Lord, there is no enemy, nor ever was, within this place. For the enemy but shifts from body to body, being impalpable; and being put down in one form, seeks a new and must again be dealt with. 'Twas in one such embodiment that he put you into slumber, ere Titania's reign began; the wizard whose form he took is long moldered, but he, being a force natural, is still amongst us. 'Twas he with whom you dealt on your spirit's late journey in mortal masque.

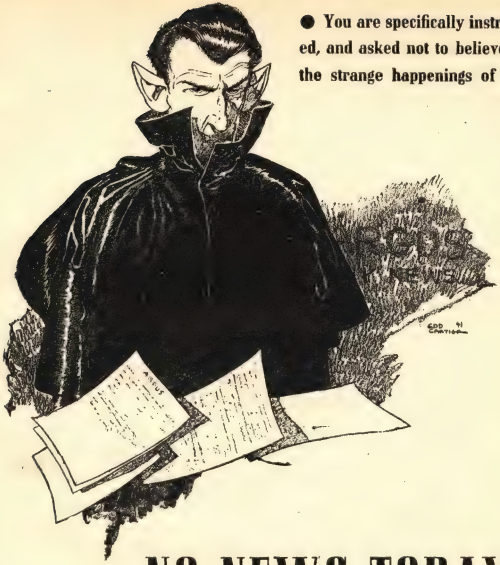
"This is the end, lord, for which you were called from sleep, that you might bring the strong power of the iron to the alliance of King Oberon's realm, which is of law. Neither can stand without the other; and now I counsel you that you send straitly to him, since the enemy in a new guise draws near his borders."

"Let it be done," said Barbarossa.

In the annals of Fairyland the story of that alliance is written—how Barbarossa and his knights journeyed to the west and won a great battle among the sea crags against an invasion of Rakshas, hideous yellow things that lived like ghouls. They were not the last of such invaders, for the enemy is ubiquitous. But Barbarossa deals hardly with them all; and there is an end of shapings and evil enchantments in that land. These have no power against the iron.

Yet there are whispers and mystery about the great red-bearded king; for it has been observed that when he takes a new love, whether from among the fays or the other people of Fairy, he tells her tales of how he spent some thirty years among the mortals. Some hold that these are merely things that he makes up; for who could believe in a world of such wild unreason that its people must blow each other to bits in order to command obedience to their wills? Some hold, on the other hand, that these tales are nothing but the disturbed dreams that Barbarossa dreamed while lying asleep under the ice, in the Wartburg castle with the ravens circling around. Yet, it is observable that there is a certain wild consistency in the king's dreams and his acts; for among his loves he has never taken one from the apple dryads.

THE END.



● **You are specifically instructed, warned, and asked not to believe a word of the strange happenings of this item—**

NO NEWS TODAY

By Cleve Cartmill

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

SOME of you will be disappointed because this editorial completely fills today's issue of the *Argus*. But I feel it is more important than news, this article. And some of the stores may be annoyed because there is no room for their ads, but a newspaper's first duty is to its readers.

You will not see me any more, so I take this means to impress on your minds one fact:

Dr. Evan Scot is not a son of Satan.

You must believe that. I am going to give you the reasons, and you will see. Then, when I finish, and after Mother Grace has run off enough copies for our subscribers, we will clean up the press, have a couple of drinks, and step through the door into the black emptiness which has been there for three days, blotting all light, waiting for us.

"I'll tell you about that blackness in due time. First, I want to explain that the rumor about Dr. Scot would never have been started if Mother Grace had attended to his job.

That was last week, the day after graduation exercises at the high school. Mother Grace came into my office from the composing room and flung several sheets of copy on my desk.

"I'll s-set no copy for a s-son of Satan," he said. He stutters a little when he is excited.

I put my feet down and looked at the copy. It was an account of the exercises, and included a few excerpts from Dr. Scot's commencement address. I then looked at Mother Grace.

He was a pink ball of indignation, his white hair almost standing out straight, his blue eyes flickering, and his round chin outthrust like a shelf.

I didn't say anything. I simply went out to the composing room and took a look at the jug of whiskey that caused Judith to name him "Mother." She said he cradled it like a lost child on Saturday nights. The jug was untouched, as it had been for the last month, since Mother went on the wagon because of the research which engaged his free time.

Back in my office, I frowned down at him. "What's it all about, Mother?"

"Evan Scot is the spawn of Lucifer. I'm damned if I'll set any type that's got his name in it."

"Dr. Scot is one of our most prominent citizens."

"That's what I mean, Buck."

"You're not making sense. Explain yourself."

"I don't dare, Buck. I like you. Just edit Scot's name out of the story and we'll forget the matter."

"We can't leave Scot's name out of the story. He was one of the highlights. The school board would be on our necks. So would Judith. She'd want to know why we messed up her copy. What would you tell her?"

"I wouldn't tell her anything, Buck. Same as I won't tell you."

I didn't want to fire him. He's a good printer. He's been all over the world several times, has worked in every State in the Union, and he treats a linotype like a younger brother. He had settled here in my shop two years ago, and was as much a part of the place as the weathered "Job Printing" sign over the door. No, I didn't want to fire him, but I had to have some kind of discipline.

"Set the story as is," I said.

"S-set it yourself. I'm q-quitting."

He took off his apron, put on his coat, and stamped out with a thirsty gleam in his eye.

Many of you know what that little man did. He got drunk and started the rumor about Dr. Scot. I don't think anybody paid any attention to him except Ralph Lake, but we took care of Ralph last night. I'm sure he doesn't believe it any longer, and he'll never see this editorial.

While Mother was getting drunk, I knew nothing about it, of course. I was busy setting type. I'm not too good at it, as you will remember. That was the issue which carried Henry Longernin's name misspelled six ways, and in which the PTA story did not appear. That was the issue which carried so many short paragraphs of odd facts about different parts of the world. Such paragraphs are kept standing on galleys in any print shop to use as filler, and I was too slow on the linotype to set all the local copy Judith had turned in, so I threw in several columns of filler.

When I was making up the pages, I was reminded of the predicament another country editor got into when he ran short of filler one day. His paper was full, except for a couple of inches in one lower corner of his front page. He was one of those crusading, bitter cusses that gave so much color to early American frontiers, and he set up a paragraph by hand in large type so that it would fill the hole. The paragraph: "A local banker and another rat fought with their fists last night at the corner of First and Main until a gentleman who was asleep in the gutter woke up and asked them to be more quiet." All three of the men referred to took a poke at the editor next day, and it is said that the practice of keeping filler on hand started at that time.

At any rate, I had plenty, and when I had run off the edition on the flatbed press I went home to bed. I didn't know what had happened to Mother, and I knew I would need another printer.

I got some inkling of Mother's activities the next morning when Dr. Evan Scot stalked into my office. He gave me a nod of cold recognition, and refused to take a chair.

"I have come to demand an apology, Mr. Buck."

This was not the hearty, pompous Dr. Scot I knew. He had an icy purpose in his eyes, and his chubby hands were rigid. I picked up a copy of the *Argus*, and skimmed through the commencement story which I had set.

"Are you misquoted, doctor? Name spelled wrong?"

He waved an impatient white hand. "I don't know. I haven't even glanced at your paper. An employee of yours, I am told, a man named Grace, has slandered me."

"He's no longer an employee of mine."

Dr. Scot inclined his head in a fractional bow. "Very well, I shall take the matter up with the—ah, proper authorities. Sorry to have disturbed you, Mr. Buck."

As he turned to go, feet scuffed across the reception room, and Mother Grace came to the door, stood swaying a little on widespread legs. He was drunk.

"Your evilness," he saluted Dr. Scot.

The doctor gave Mother an aloof examination, eyes lit by a remote curiosity as they touched on Mother's puffed face, tousled white hair, wrinkled clothes, and stubbly beard.

"You talk too much," Dr. Scot said.

"But with authority, sir," Mother replied.

"What authority?"

"The very highest, I suspect. The 'Sabbaticon.'"

"What is that?"

Mother Grace leered crookedly. "Don't play innocent, prince."

Dr. Scot's reaction to this was what caused me to agree with Mother Grace until Satan's public-relations counsel set us straight on the matter. Dr. Scot was angry. You could see a muscle twitch under one jowl,

and his ample shoulders lifted a fraction. But his anger was cold. Thoughtful is perhaps a better term. He held his gaze steady on Mother Grace for a full ten seconds. Then:

"You talk too much," he repeated, and thrust through the door.

MOTHER GRACE stared after him for a few seconds, then came inside unsteadily and dropped into a chair.

"Buck, I want to talk to you."

"You'd better. What goes on, Mother? Are you serious in this talk about Dr. Scot?"

"Deadly, Buck. And I've got a notion that it *is* deadly, too. I don't think I'll be around much longer. But before I disappear, I'd like to get some information out to the public."

"Disappear to where?"

"Who knows? Where did the others disappear to? The ones who walked through their doors and were never seen again? I don't know where they went, but I think I know why. Do you want to hear about it?"

"If it's entertaining, and brief."

"It may be dangerous, Buck."

"Nonsense. You're still drunk."

Mother looked at me with a still, unwavering earnestness. "Yes, I am, a little. Otherwise I'd be afraid to tell you. But I can't keep it bottled up any longer. Wait."

He went into the composing room, and I could hear him rummaging in the little cubbyhole where he slept. He came back with a peculiar book and several pages of manuscript in his careful handwriting. He tossed the book on my desk.

"That's the 'Sabbaticon,' Buck."

It seemed to be of leather. The cover was a heavy sort of calf, with no inscription or decoration, and the pages were of a thin, almost transparent leather, with a texture like heavy crêpe. These pages were closely covered with symbols which were strange to me. I had never seen a language with characters remotely similar.

I laid the book aside. "Well?"

"That's the handbook for the Sons of Satan."

"Let's have it from the beginning, Mother. You're still not making sense."

He began to talk, and after a few minutes I went through the reception room and locked the front door. I didn't want us to be interrupted.

He said that, according to this all-leather book, a world-wide society, called the Sons of Satan, had been formed early in the history of civilization. The title of the group is accurate, he said; they are physical offspring of the devil, conceived in unions at Sabbats, gatherings of worshipers of evil.

"Where did you get this book?" I asked.

Mother Grace gave me a bleak look. "It belonged to my mother, Buck."

"Good heavens. What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. She died when I was born, and my uncle who raised and educated me gave it to me among other effects she had left. I've spent my life trying to translate it. The language isn't Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, or any other known today. I finished the translation a couple of weeks ago."

"How do you know your translation is correct?"

"I . . . I feel it, Buck. Here's the meat of it, the rules of operation." He handed me part of his translation.

I WON'T REPRODUCE it here. There isn't space, nor time, perhaps. We're a little rushed for time. We're getting hungry, and we are determined not to suffer. We are just going to step through the door into that dead-black void.

But the rules. The Sons of Satan are supposed to be men of comfortable means. No more. Not wealthy, but the kind we common work-a-day folk admire. The men who are active in community affairs, the kind who are pointed out as local examples for children to follow.

They are not many, these Sons of Satan; only enough to provide a flavor of moderate success everywhere.

Their opinions are respected, but, of course, divided. Thus they attract followers to both sides of any question. This stirs up conflict that is highly desirable from their point of view. Their principal advice to youth is, roughly: "Work. Earn your bread by the sweat of your brow. Keep your nose to the grindstone. Fame and success can be yours only if you are diligent."

"Making a virtue of a curse on mankind," Mother Grace commented on this.

"Diligence is a virtue," I said. "Men do succeed by constant effort."

"How many?" Mother Grace jeered. "What percentage of those who slave away their lives ever attain to comfort? I'll tell you. Only enough to promote envy, dissatisfaction, and uneasiness. It's in there. Read on."

I see that in describing the text of the "Sabbaticon" I have written in the present indicative. "They are," I have said of the Sons of Satan. I want to make it clear that I don't believe they exist. You must not believe it, either.

I finished. I looked at Mother Grace. "I don't believe it."

He picked up the leather book and opened it to the last page. "It's easy to check. All I have to do is read a paragraph aloud. If my translation is correct, we'll have the old boy himself here in the office."

"Don't be idiotic."

"Want me to try? Want me to summon up the Prince of Darkness? I've been afraid to try before."

"Your translation may be correct, but the whole book is probably a prehistoric fairy tale."

"By whom, Buck? By whom?"

"How should I know?" The uneasy feeling I'd had while reading his translation began to wear off, and I managed a grin. "Go ahead. Give him a call. We'll get an exclusive interview."

MOTHER GRACE stacked the sheets of his translation neatly on one corner of my desk, pushed his chair to one side, and knelt. Despite his rumpled condition and appearance of hard wear, he had a curious dignity.

"I hope we know what I'm doing," he said softly, and began to chant in a monotone.

He had hardly said two words, or phrases, or whatever, of that scrambled language before we had a visitor.

He appeared in the connecting doorway to the reception room. Appeared suddenly, silently, without any traditional puffs of smoke or smell of brimstone. He was young, and aside from his somewhat peculiar ears and odd black costume, he was not very different from the rest of us.

He broke into Mother Grace's chant. "You talk too much." He pointed a long, dark finger at the "Sabbaticon," said, "You have no right to that," and the book vanished. "Or that," he said, and the translation was gone.

"Shut up!" he said as Mother Grace opened his mouth as if to ask a question. "Listen to me, both of you. I am going to leave you here. Any time you like, just step out of a door, or window, and you'll receive detailed attention."

He seemed about to leave. "May I ask a question?"

He flicked an impatient look at me. "What do you want?"

"You mentioned detailed attention. What does that mean?"

"You'll see."

"Are you Satan himself?" Mother Grace asked.

"Certainly not," the creature snapped. "He has better matters to occupy him. I'm his public-relations counsel."

"B-but the invocation," Mother stuttered. "It was s-supposed to call up the d-devil."

The creature looked at Mother Grace long and thoughtfully. "So that's what you were doing? I—see. I'll be back," he said, and vanished.

Mother Grace got up off his knees. He was trembling. But no more than I was. The full impact of the event had just hit me. We looked at each other

and worked our mouths in an effort to speak, but couldn't make a sound. Mother Grace staggered to the door.

Something brought him up short. Nothing physical, but something he saw. He looked fixedly toward the street for some time. He found his voice, or at least a ghost of it.

"C-come here, B-Buck."

That was when I saw the darkness.

I couldn't see through the windows or the glass on the door. I could hear traffic sounds in the street as usual, but I couldn't see anything. The word "ARGUS" on the big window was clearly outlined on the deeper black beyond.

I didn't feel that somebody had painted the windows. I felt that the dark had existence, beyond the windows and the door. I felt that it had—well, entity. I feel that way now, while I'm writing this.

I had a bad time getting out the words: "Open the door, Mother, open the door."

He went to the door, unlocked it, yanked it open. He shrank back, and I, even though I was across the room, took a backward step.

We couldn't see through the open door.

It's HARD to tell you about that darkness. If I try, I'll make it sound ridiculous. So I'd better not try. Just take my word for it, it wasn't at all ridiculous.

Somebody called from outside: "Hello, Buck. Hello, Mother."

We each lifted a hand. As we did so, Judith stepped through that black nothingness, her hair an almost blinding brightness against the background, and the white silhouette of her dress was like a cutout pattern.

We stood for a moment, Mother examining the floor, I trying to see some flicker of movement in traffic I could hear outside, Judith examining both of us. I knew suddenly I had to know what would happen if I stepped outside. I had to know if we had been tricked. I took a pencil from my pocket.

"Here," I said to Judith. "Toss this through the door."

She frowned. "Games?"

"Just throw it."

She did so, and I heard it fall on the walk. It hit that curtain of blackness and, for me, vanished. "Now bring it to me, please."

"I'm no water spaniel," she said. "Fetch it yourself."

"I mean it, Judith. This is no gag."

She shook a puzzled head and stepped into nothing. She came back and gave me the pencil. I threw it.

I didn't hear it fall.

Judith blinked. "You ought to go on the stage, Buck. I saw it, then I didn't. Nice illusion."

"Little thing I picked up," I said.

"From your tone, I'd say you dug it up."

"What did you see, chicken?"

"See? I know enough about that sort of thing to know I didn't *see* anything. I thought, though, I saw a pencil fly barely through the door and—*f-f-ft*. It wasn't there any more. How did you do it?"

"It's a secret." To Mother Grace, who was staring at the door, I said, "Let's go to work."

He ambled into the composing room. I flung another look at the door and started after him.

"Buck," Judith said softly, "wait a minute."

She looked unhappy, puzzled. "What is it, kid?"

"It's about Ralph, Buck. And what Mother Grace told him last night."

"Come in my office." When we were in there, and I couldn't see the blackness, "Tell," I said.

"Well, Mother got stiff as a butler last night and gave Ralph a lot of guff about how we're being tricked by some crazy devil's club, he calls it. He was so convincing that Ralph believes it. So Ralph wants to ring wedding bells, even though we're broke. The hell with work, Ralph said, with that and everything else. There's no point to working, he said, if it's all a hoax. I don't know quite what to do with him. We still haven't paid his dental bill."

What could I tell her? At that time, I believed Mother's story. "Bring him in tomorrow, Judith. We'll have Mother issue a denial, or something. We'll figure out something. And you can have today off."

"Thanks, Buck," she said. "I've a couple of stories to write first."

"Leave your notes. I'll write 'em. I'm expecting a visitor for an important conference."

She gave me a sheaf of typed stationery. "These are the speeches for the Club Moderne tonight. Quote as liberally as you like. Here are the scores on the baseball game yesterday, and police notes. One drunk, two vags. Nothing ever happens in this town. See you tomorrow."

I went out to talk to Mother Grace.

Now I want all of you *Argus* subscribers to understand that it is difficult for me to relate and interpret events from this point in my narrative to the present. I am going to be honest with you. Please believe me. But I am going to tell what I think is essential to a correct analysis, and no more. There are certain facts I must leave unrelated, for I feel that they would confuse the issue.

Newspaper reporters learn early in their training to "slant" a story. By the twist of a phrase, by the deletion of contributing factors, they learn to make even a factual account of events in motion to mean something that is not wholly—or something that is more than—the truth. I am going to do that here, but only in order to be what I think is more honest. I want this last testament to be read and remembered as the truth.

One of the facts I am going to eliminate from consideration is the story Mother Grace had set on the linotype while I was talking about Ralph Lake with Judith. I leave it out because it simply can't be true; I don't dare let you believe it.

When I came into the composing room, Mother added the last slug of type to the galley on his machine

and took a proof. He handed it to me without comment. I read it, and I believed it—at the time.

"These are verbatim quotations from the 'Sabbaticon'?" I asked.

"I'll swear to it," Mother Grace said. "I've been so close to that devilish book that I know it, word for word. I'll never forget it."

I read it again. Then I followed Mother's glance to the little window high in the wall above the press. The darkness was there, too, a kind of polarized darkness which allowed light to come into the building, but prevented us from seeing out.

"I want to compare our reactions, Mother. Do you see a sort of blackness?"

"Yeah, Buck. That pencil, too. Even the hairs in my eyebrows prickled."

"Maybe we can't get a paper out."

"I thought about that, Buck. But let's try. We've got to let the world know."

"Yes. We've got to let the world know. But look, if there's only one in every hundred thousand who is a Son of Satan, how could they be tracked? It would be like the seventeenth century witch hunts. Thousands of innocents would be killed."

"There's a sign, Buck."

He told me the sign, and I am not telling it here, because, as I say, it would confuse the issue. And I no longer believe it.

And I ask you to believe my first statement: Dr. Evan Scot is not a Son of Satan. I ask you to take it on faith. You must believe me, as you will see. I am not going to tell you the sign so that you can look for it on him. I don't want you to become confused.

"Look, Mother," I said as soon as I got my voice working again. "If I can throw a pencil through the door, it stands to reason we can't get an issue of the paper outside. But let's don't shoot our whole load on an experiment. Let's put out the regular edition, with none of this in it. A trial balloon, so to speak. If that goes out, then we can shoot this tomorrow."

"That's sense, Buck."

"Another thing. Our—ah, visitor said he'd be back. When, do you think?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"You know more about his kind than I. You had the book, didn't you?"

That hurt him, and I hadn't meant it to. He jerked, as if I'd hit him with a lead pig, then looked at me steadily.

"Buck, if you think I'm one of the Sons that got away, and I'll admit possession of the book might indicate it, I'd rather you'd kill me here. Or I'll step out the door. I mean that, Buck. If you think there's something wrong about my ancestry, if you can't trust me to the limit, I'd rather get out. I want people to have this information. I want to help, but if you're afraid of me, I'll walk out into whatever that is waiting."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Let's get to work, pal."

THAT EDITION went out, but as you know, you didn't get a paper the next day, or yesterday. The press broke down. There was nothing unusual about it. It does that occasionally. We did not feel that supernatural forces had stopped us, because we could see a gear that had crystallized. It wasn't even dramatic, crawling around in grease and printer's ink.

But we didn't have time to talk to Judith and Ralph, and they said they'd come back later.

They did. Last night. So did the creature who had arrived while Mother Grace was chanting the paragraph from the "Sabbaticon." We had just finished repairing the press, cleaned ourselves up, and were having a drink, when he was suddenly there again, in the composing room with us.

His strange ears were fairly quivering. "I've got a million things to do," he said, "and you pull a stupid trick like that, Grace. Shut up! Listen to me, both of you. As a result of flapping your mouth, a special reception is being prepared for you. Not only that, but I'll be forced to throw the Wall around half the houses in this town if the rumors you set in motion are accepted as facts. Fools! As if I weren't busy enough, you try to overwork me further."

There seemed nothing to be gained by being afraid of him, or nice to him, so I said, "You're the fool. Why did you leave that copy of the book where anybody could get it?"

"Shut up!" he snapped. "I didn't do it. It was before my time. It wouldn't have happened if I'd had anything to do with it."

"But it happened, and it wasn't our fault. Why should we suffer?"

"Because I say you shall."

"So you're afraid to let the truth become known? You don't think you could cope with people if they realize that most of our eternal verities are vicious jokes to keep us unhappy forever?"

"Who said anything about truth, fool?"

"Your actions admit it. You don't have to say it."

"I didn't say that the truth was in that book. I tell you this: the Wall is not around this building necessarily because you have discovered a truth, but because you believe it to be true. The same will be done to anyone else who believes as you." He turned to Mother Grace, who was staring at the little window high in the wall above the press. "Have you told this story in detail to anyone besides this idiot?"

Mother Grace was slow in bringing his eyes back into focus, and before he could say anything, a pounding rattled the locked front door, and Judith yelled:

"Oh, Buck! Let us in!"

Mother Grace answered the question. "No. I didn't tell anybody."

"Who's out there?" our visitor snapped.

"A couple of my employees, here for a conference."

"Keep them in the front. I don't want them to see me. I'm busy enough as it is."

"I'll be right back."

I told Judith and Ralph to stay in the reception room and went back. I wanted the answer to one more question.

"Look," I said. "You won't admit the truth of Mother's story, you won't deny it. Answer me this: Is the 'Sabbaticon' itself a hoax? Was it planted just to increase the sum total of unhappiness?"

He smiled. "That would be an amusing refinement. If it had been planted, if people believed it, and if every man would then look on his neighbor with a suspicion of diabolic origin—yes, that would be pretty. I'll file that away for future reference."

"Then it isn't true?"

"Oh, I didn't say that," he said quickly. "I didn't say anything."

"I say the 'Sabbaticon' was the hoax, then. I say that its story of the Sons of Satans was untrue. I am going to tell the readers of my paper that, if I may."

"Surely," he agreed. "If you can make them believe it, I won't need to use the Wall on this town. I'll welcome anything to avoid that on top of my other duties."

"What about us?" Mother Grace asked. "Wh-what if w-we change our b-belief? Will we get free?"

"No. Oh, if you changed your belief, yes. But you can't. You believe it too deeply. Now, I've wasted too much time here already. I don't care what you do, but if you clear up the mess this fool started, your reception won't be quite so—ah, special, when you step into the Wall."

He was suddenly gone, and my first sensation was regret that he had never turned his back to us once. I can't tell you whether he had a tail or not.

But I can clear up his one definite misstatement. I have said several times that I do not believe the "Sabbaticon" was a true record. Once I had penetrated the hoax, I didn't believe any more in the Sons of Satan. My disbelief was so strong that the first thing I did was to tear up the proofs of the quotations Mother Grace had set—the quotations I did not include in this—and threw the type into the linotype pot.

We convinced Ralph Lake. He finally believed that Mother Grace's story was a phase of D. T.'s. How we did it is not important. Those of you who know the big, stubborn prizefighter will realize what a job we had. But he believed us, and so shall you.

Mother Grace and I also gave all our money to Judith and Ralph, and drew checks for our bank balances, and got their promise to catch the early-morning train to Kansas City, where they will be married. I mention this here, so that the bank will honor the checks when they come in.

* * * * * * *

THE ASTERISKS indicate an interruption. Dr. Evan Scot came in as I sat at my typewriter finishing this editorial. I don't have time to begin this over again from the beginning. Mother Grace and I are too hungry. He has been taking the sheets from me as I finish them, to set in type. This is the twenty-first sheet. I am sure you will forgive me for having used up all these words to try to prove something that was proved so dramatically a moment ago.

Mother Grace and Dr. Scot got into an argument. Dr. Scot wanted an apology. Mother Grace refused. I stepped between them to stop the fight. Mother Grace dared Dr. Scot to take off his shirt.

Mother Grace was so angry he was crying. "You d-don't dare take it off—you don't dare, you son of Lucifer!"

Dr. Scot gave him a cold but puzzled look, and stripped slowly and deliberately to the waist. Mother Grace looked at Dr. Scot's back, and his shoulders slumped.

"I apologize, doc," he said. "I w-was wrong. Damn it!" he shouted, and went back into the composing room.

Dr. Scot got back into his clothes, nodded a cool good-by to me, and stepped into the Wall. I could hear his steps on the sidewalk, but I couldn't see him, nor could I see street lamps, or star shine, through that curtain.

We are going to step into it as soon as we run this edition off the press, but I am glad there is no danger to you.

Provided—that you don't believe in the Sons of Satan. I don't. I say it again, I don't. You must not. *Must* not.

The Wall will be around your house if you do.

THE END.

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

A GOOD KNIGHT'S WORK

By Robert Bloch

● A helping hand from the horny-handed gentleman with the solid iron nightshirt proved of use against the modern equivalent of ye olde dragon—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

I AM stepping on the gas, air is pouring into the truck and curses are pouring out, because I feel like I get up on the wrong side of the gutter this morning.

Back in the old days I am always informing the mob how I am going to get away from it all and buy a little farm in the country and raise chickens. So now I raise chickens and wish I am back in the old days raising hell.

It is one of those things, and today it is maybe two or three of them, in spades. Perhaps you are lucky and do not live in the Corn Belt, so I will mention a few items to show that the guy naming it knows what he's talking about.

This morning I wake up at four a. m. because fifty thousand sparrows are holding a Communist rally under the window. I knock my shins over a wheelbarrow in the back yard because the plumbing is remote. When I get dressed I have to play tag with fifty chickens I am taking to market, and by the time that's over I am covered with more feathers than a senator who gets adopted by Indians in a newsreel. After which all I do is load the cacklers on the truck, drive fifty miles to town, sell biddies at a loss, and drive back—strictly without breakfast.

Breakfast I must catch down the road at the tavern, where I got to pay ten bucks to Thin Tommy Malloon for protection.

That is my set-up and explains why I am not exactly bubbling over with good spirits. There is nothing to do about it but keep a stiff upper lip—mostly around the bottle I carry with me on the trip back.

Well, I am almost feeling better after a few quick ones, and am just about ready to stop my moans and groans when I spot this sign on the road.

I don't know how it is with you. But this is how it is with me. I do not like signs on the road a bit, and of all the signs I do not like, the SIAMESE SHAVE signs I hate in spades.

They stand along the highway in series, and each of them has a line of poetry on it so when you pass them all you read a little poem about SIAMESE SHAVE. They are like the Old Lady Goose rhymes they feed the juveniles, and I do not have any love for Ma Goose and her poetry.

Anyhow, when I see this first sign I let out some steam and take another nip. But I cannot resist reading the sign because I always do. It says:

"DON'T WEAR A LONG BEARD."

And a little further on the second one reads:

"LIKE A GOAT."

Pretty soon I come to the third one, saying:

"JUST TAKE A RAZOR."

And all at once I'm happy, hoping maybe somebody made a mistake and the fourth sign will say:

"AND CUT YOUR THROAT!"

So I can hardly wait to see the last one, and I'm looking ahead on the road, squinting hard. Then I slam on the brakes.

No, I don't see a sign. There is a *thing* blocking the road, instead. *Two* things.

One of these things is a horse. At least, it looks more like a horse than anything else I could see on four drinks. It is a horse covered with a kind of awning, or tent that hangs down over its legs and out on its neck. In fact, I noticed that this horse is wearing a mask over its head with eyeholes, like it belonged to the Ku Klux Klan.

The other *thing* is riding the horse. It is all silver, from head to foot, and I notice that there is a long plume growing out of its head. It looks like a man, and it has a long, sharp pole in one hand and the top off a garbage can in the other.

Now when I look at this party I am certain of only one thing. This is not the Lone Ranger.

When I drive a little closer my baby-blue eyes tell me that what I am staring at is a man dressed up in a suit of armor, and that the long sharp pole is nothing but a

little thing like a twelve-foot spear with a razor on the end.

Who he is and why he is dressed up this way may be very interesting to certain parties like the State police, but I am very far away from being one. Also I am very far away from Thin Tommy Malloon who is waiting for my ten bucks protection money. Thin Tommy is not the kind of a man who likes waiting, especially for money.

So when I see Old Ironsides blocking the road, I place my head outside the window and request, "Get the hell out of the way, buddy!" in a loud but polite voice.

Which turns out to be a mistake, in spades and no trump.

The party in the tin tuxedo just looks at the truck coming his way, and cocks his iron head when he sees steam coming from the carburetor. The exhaust is beginning to make trombone noises, because I am stepping hard on the gas, and this seems to make up the heavy dresser's mind for him.

"Yoicks!" howls his voice behind his helmet. "A dragon!"

And all at once he levels that lance of his, knocks his tootsies against the horse's ribs, and starts coming head-on for the truck.

"For Pendragon and England!" he bawls, over the clanking. And charges straight ahead like a baby tank.

That twelve-foot razor of his is pointed straight for my radiator, and I do not wish him to cut my motor, so naturally I swing the old truck out of the way.

This merely blows the carburetor cap higher than the national debt, and out shoots enough steam and hot air to supply a dozen congressmen.

The horse rears up, and the tintype lets out a yap, letting his lance loose. Instead of hitting the radiator, it smashes my windshield.

Also my temper. I stop the truck and get out, fast. "Now, listen, buddy," I reason with him.

"Aha!" comes the voice from under the helmet. "A wizard!" He uses a brand of double-talk I do not soon forget. "Halt ye, for it is Pallagyn who speaks."

I am in no mood for orations, so I walk up to him, waving a pipe wrench.

"Bust my windows, eh, buddy? Monkey business on a public highway, is it? I'm going to—Yow!"

I am a personality that seldom hollers "Yow!" even at a burlesque show, but when this armor-plated jockey slides off his horse and comes for me, he is juggling a sharp six feet of sword. And six feet of sword sailing for your neck is worth a "Yow!" any day, I figure.

I also figure I had better duck unless I want a shave and a haircut, and it is lucky for me that Iron-lung has to move slow when he whams his sword down at me.

I come up under his guard and give him a rap on the old orange with my pipe wrench.

There is no result.

The steel king drops his sword and lets out another roar, and I caress his helmet again with the wrench. Still no result. I get my result on the third try. The wrench breaks.

And then his iron arms grab me, and I am in for it.

The first thing I know, everything is turning black as solitary, and my sparring partner is reaching for a shiver at his belt. I get my foot there, fast.

All I can do is push forward, but it works. About a hundred and fifty pounds of armor loses balance, and there is nothing for the guy inside to do except go down with it. Which he does, on his back. Then I am on his chest, and I roll up the Venetian blind on the front of his helmet.

"Hold, enough!" comes the double-talk from inside. "Prithee, hold!"

"O. K., buddy. But open up that mail box of yours. I want to see the face of the damned fool that tries to get me into a traffic accident with a load of tin."

He pulls up the shutters, and I get a peek at a purple face decorated with red whiskers. There are blue eyes, too, and they look down, ashamed.

"Ye are the first, O Wizard, to gaze upon the vanquished face of Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep," he mumbles.

I get off his chest like it was the hot seat. Because, although I am very fond of nuts, I like them only in fruit cakes.

"I've got to be going," I mention. "I don't know who you are or why you are running around like this, and I maybe ought to have you run in, but I got business up the road, see? So long."

I start walking away and turn around. "Besides, my name is not O. Wizard."

"Verily," says the guy who calls himself Sir Pallagyn, getting up slow, with a lot of rattling. "Ye are a wizard, for ye ride a dragon breathing fire and steam—"

I AM THINKING of the fire and steam Thin Tommy Malloon is breathing right now, so I pay little or no attention, but get in the truck. Then this Pallagyn comes running up and yells, "Wait!"

"What for?"

"My steed and arms are yours by right of joust."

Something clicks inside my head, and even if it is an eight ball, I get interested. "Wait a minute," I suggest. "Just who are you and where do you hang out?"

"Why," says he, "as I bespoke, O Wizard—I am Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep, sent here ensorcelled by Merlin, from Arthur's court at Camelot. And I hang out at the greves in my armor," he adds, tucking in some cloth sticking out of the chinks and joints in his heavy suit.

"Huh?" is about the best I can do.

"And having bested me in fair combat, ye gain my steed and weapons, by custom of the joust." He shakes his head, making a noise like a Tommy-gun. "Merlin will be very angry when he hears of this, I wot."

"Merlin?"

"Merlin, the Gray Wizard, who sent me upon the quest," he explains. "He it was who sped me forward in Time, to quest for the Cappadocian Tabouret."

Now I am not altogether a lug—as you can tell by the way I look up some of the spelling on these items—and when something clicks inside my noggin it means I am thinking, but difficult.

I know I am dealing with the worst kind of screwball—the kind that bounces—but still there is some sense in what he is saying. I see this King Arthur and this Merlin in a picture once, and I see also some personalities in armor that are called knights, which means they are King Arthur's trigger men. They hang out around a big table in a stone hide-out and are always spoiling for trouble and going off on quests—which means, putting the goniff on stuff which doesn't belong on them, or copping dames from other knights.

But I figure all this happens maybe a hundred years ago, or so, over in Europe, before they throw away their armor and change into colored shirts to put the rackets on an organized paying basis.

And this line about going forward in Time to find something is practically impossible, unless you go for Einstein's theory, which I don't, preferring Ann Sheridan.

Still, it is you might say unusual, so I answer this squirrel. "What you're trying to tell me is that you come here from King Arthur's court and some magician sends you to find something?"

"Verily, O Wizard. Merlin counseled me that I might not be believed," says Pallagyn, sadlike. He chews on his mustache, without butter. He almost looks like he is promoting a weeper.

"I believe you, buddy," I say, wanting to cheer him up and also get out of here.

"Then take my mount and weapons—it is required by law of the joust," he insists.

Right then I figure I would rather take a drink. I do. It makes me feel better. I get out and walk over to the oat-burner. "I don't know what to do with this four-legged blue barrel," I tell him, "or your manicure set, either. But if it makes you happy, I will take them with me."

So I grab the nag and take him around back of the truck, let down the ramp and put him in. When I get

back, Sir Pallagyn is piling his steel polo set into the front seat.

"I place these on the dragon for thee," he says.

"This isn't a dragon," I explain. "It's a Ford."

"Ford? Merlin did not speak of that creature." He climbs into the seat after his cutlery, looking afraid the steering wheel will bite him.

"Hey, where you going?"

"With thee, O Wizard. The steed and weapons are thine, but I must follow them, even into captivity. It is the law of the quest."

"You got laws on the brain, that's your trouble. Now listen, I don't like hitchhikers—"

THEN I GANDER at my ticker and see it is almost ten and remember I am to meet Thin Tommy at eight. So I figure, why not? I will give this number a short lift down the pike and dump him where it is quiet and forget him. Maybe I can also find out whether or not there is somebody missing from Baycrest, which is the local laughing academy, and turn him in. Anyway, I have my date to keep, so I start the truck rolling.

This Pallagyn lets out a sort of whistle through his whiskers when I hit it up, so I say, "What's the matter, buddy, are you thirsty?"

"No," he gasps. "But we are flying!"

"Only doing forty," I tells him. "Look at the speedometer."

"Forty what? Speedometer?"

My noggin is clicking like a slot machine in a church bazaar. This baby isn't faking! I get another look at his armor and see it is solid stuff—not like fancy-dress costumes, but real heavy, with little designs in gold and silver running through it. And he doesn't know what a car is, or a speedometer!

"You need a drink," I says, taking it for him, and then passing him the bottle.

"Mead?" he says.

"No, Haig & Haig. Try a slug."

He tilts the bottle and takes a terrific triple-tongue. He lets out a roar and turns redder than his whiskers.

"I am bewitched!" he yells. "Ye black wizard!"

"Hold it. You'll cool off in a minute. Besides, I'm not a wizard. I'm a truck farmer, believe it or not, and don't let them kid you down at the Bastille. I'm through with the rackets."

He gets quieter in a minute and begins to ask me questions. Before I know it, I am explaining who I am and what I am doing, and after another drink it doesn't seem so screwy to me any more.

Even when he tells me about this Merlin baby putting a spell on him and sending him through Time to go on a quest, I swallow it like my last shot. I break down and tell him to call me Butch. In a few minutes we're practically cell mates.

"Ye may call me Pallagyn," he says.

"O. K., Pal. How about another slug?"

This time he is more cautious, and it must go down fairly well, because he smacks his lips and doesn't hardly even turn pink.

"Might I inquire as to your destination, O Butch?" he lets out, after a minute or so.

"You might," I says. "There it is, straight ahead."

I point out the building we are just coming to. It is a roadhouse and tavern called "The Blunder Inn," and it is in this rat hole that Thin Tommy Malloon hangs his hat and holster. This I explain to Pal.

"It doth not resemble a rat hole," he comments.

"Any place where Thin Tommy gets in must be a hat hole," I tell him, "because Thin Tommy is a rat. He is a wrongo but strongo. Nevertheless, I must now go in and pay him his ten dollars for protection or he will sprinkle lye on my alfalfa."

"What do you mean?" asks Pallagyn.

So I explain to him very simple in words of three letters how Thin Tommy use to be a high number in the rackets back in town but decides to retire. How he buys this roadhouse and clips customers at night, but being naturally a very energetic type of guy, he gets bored unless he can clip customers by day, also. So he figures out that he can sell protection to farmers in the country just like he sells it to grocery stores and gas stations in the city.

"Protection?" interrupts Pallagyn.

"Yes, Pal. I have a little farm, and I must pay Thin Tommy ten a week or else I will have trouble, such as finding ground glass in my hen mash, or a pineapple in my silo."

"Ye pay to keep vandals from despoiling the crops?" asks the knight. "Would it not be expedient to discover the miscreants and punish them?"

"I *know* who would wreck the farm if I didn't pay," I reply. "Thin Tommy."

"Ah, now methinks I comprehend thy plight. Thou art a serf, and this Thin Thomas is thy overlord."

Somehow this remark, and the way Pallagyn says it, seems to show me up for a sucker. And I have just enough drink in me to resent it.

"I am no serf," I shout. "As a matter of fact, I am waiting a long time to fix the clock of this Thin Tommy. So today I pay him no ten dollars, and I am going in to tell him so to what he calls his face."

Pallagyn listens to me kind of close, because he seems pretty ignorant on English and grammar, but he catches on and smiles.

"Spoken like a right true knight," he says. "I shall accompany ye on this mission, for I find in my heart a liking for thy steadfast purpose, and a hatred of Thin Thomas."

"Sit where you are," I says, fast. "I will handle this myself. Because Thin Tommy does not like strangers coming into his joint in the daytime without an invitation, and you are dressed kind of loud and conspicuous. So you stay here," I tell him, "and have a drink."

And I pull up and climb out of the car and march into the tavern fast.

MY HEART is going fast also, because what I am about to do is enough to make any heart go fast in case Thin

Tommy gets an idea to stop it from beating altogether. Which he sometimes does when he is irked, particularly over money.

Even so I walk up to the bar and sure enough, there is Thin Tommy standing there polishing the glasses with boxing gloves on. Only when I look again I realize these are not boxing gloves at all, but merely Thin Tommy's hands.

Thin Tommy is not really thin, you understand, but is called that because he weighs about three hundred fifty pounds, stripped—such as once a month, when he takes a bath.

"So, it's you!" he says, in a voice like a warden.

"Hello, Thin Tommy," I greet him. "How are tricks?"

"I will show you how tricks are if you do not cough up those ten berries fast and furious," grunts Thin Tommy. "All of the others have been here two or three hours ago, and I am waiting to go to the bank."

"Go right ahead," I tell him. "I wouldn't stop you."

Thin Tommy drops the glass he is polishing and leans over the bar. "Hand it over," he says through his teeth. They are big yellow teeth, all smashed together in not such a pleasant grin.

I grin right back at him because how can he see my knees shaking?

"I have nothing for you, Tommy," I get out. "In fact, that is why I stopped in, to tell you that from now on I do not require protection any longer."

"Ha!" yells Thin Tommy, pounding on the bar and then jumping around it with great speed for a man of his weight. "Bertram!" he calls. "Roscoe!"

Bertram and Roscoe are Tommy's two waiters, but I know Tommy is not calling them in to serve me.

They come running out of the back, and I see they have experience in such matters before, because Bertram is carrying a blackjack and Roscoe has a little knife in his hand. This knife worries me most, because I am practically certain that Roscoe is never a boy scout.

By the time I see all this, Thin Tommy is almost on top of me, and he lets go with one arm for my jaw. I bend my head down just in time, but Thin Tommy's other hand catches me from the side and slaps me across the room. I fall over a chair, and by this time Bertram and Roscoe are ready to wait on me. In fact, one of them pulls out the chair I fell over, and tries to hit me on the head with it.

I let out a yell and grab up a salt cellar from the table. This I push down Bertram's mouth, and I am just ready to throw a little pepper in Roscoe's eyes when Thin Tommy crashes over, grabs the knife from Roscoe's hand, and backs me into the corner.

All at once I hear a crash outside the door, and somebody hollers, "Yoicks! Pendragon and Pallagyn!"

INTO the room gallops Sir Pallagyn. He has got his sword in one hand, and the empty bottle in the other, and he is full to the eyeballs with courage.

He lets the bottle go first and it catches Bertram in the side of the head, just when he is getting the salt cellar out of his mouth. Bertram slides down with a sort of moan, and Roscoe and Tommy turn around.

"It's one of them there rowboats, like I seen at the Fair!" remarks Thin Tommy.

"Yeah," says Roscoe, who is all at once very busy when Pallagyn comes for him with his sword. In fact Roscoe is so busy he falls over the chair and lands on his face, which gets caught in a cuspidor. Pallagyn is ready to whack him one when Thin Tommy drops hold of me and lets out a grunt.

He grabs up the blackjack and the dagger both in the same hand and lets fly. They bounce off Pallagyn's helmet, of course, so Thin Tommy tries a chair. This doesn't work, either, so he picks up the table.

Pallagyn just turns kind of surprised and starts coming for him. And Thin Tommy backs away.

"No . . . no—" he says. All at once he reaches into his hip pocket and pulls out the old lead poisoner.

"Watch out!" I yell, trying to get to Tommy before he can shoot. "Duck, Pal—duck!"

Pallagyn ducks, but he is still running forward and his armor is so heavy he can't stop if he wants to keep from falling over.

The gun goes off over his head, but then Sir Pallagyn is going on, and he runs right into Thin Tommy, butting his head into his stomach. Thin Tommy just gives one "Oooooof!" and sits down backward, holding his belly where the helmet hit it, and he turns very green indeed.

Pallagyn sticks out his sword, but I say, "Never mind. This ought to teach him a lesson."

Going out, Thin Tommy just manages to whisper to me, "Who is that guy?"

"That," I tell him, "is my new hired man. So if I was you, I wouldn't plant any pineapples on my farm, because he is allergic to fruit."

So we leave and climb back into the truck.

"Thanks, Pal," I say. "You not only threw a scare into that monkey but you also saved my life. I am in debt to you, whoever you are, and if Thin Tommy didn't serve such rotgut, I would take you back in and buy you a drink."

"Verily, 'tis a trifle," says Pallagyn.

"I'll do you the same some day, Pal," I tell him. "You are my buddy."

"Ye could help me now, methinks."

"How?"

"Why, in pursuit of my quest. I was sent here by Merlin to seek the Cappadocian Tabouret."

"I do not know anything about the new night clubs," I tell him. "I am not an uptown boy any longer."

"The Cappadocian Tabouret," says Pallagyn, ignoring me, "is the table on which the Holy Grail will rest, once we find it."

"Holy Grail?"

So Pallagyn began to tell me a long yarn about how he is living in a castle with this King Arthur and a hundred other triggers who are all knights like he is. As near as I get it, all they do is sit around and drink and

fight each other, which makes it look like this King Arthur is not so good in controlling his mob.

The brain in this outfit is this guy Merlin, who is a very prominent old fuddy in the Magician's Union. He is always sending the lads out to rescue dames that have been snatched, or to knock off the hoods of other mobs, but what he is really interested in is this Holy Grail.

I cannot catch exactly what the Holy Grail is, except it's kind of a loving cup or trophy that has disappeared from some hock shop back there in the Middle Ages. But everybody is hot to find it, including the big boys in the mob like Sir Galahad and Sir Lancelot.

When Pallagyn mentions these two I know I have heard of them some place, so naturally I ask questions and find out quite a bit about ancient times and knights and how they live and about the tournaments—which are pretty much the same as the Rose Bowl games, without a take—and many other items which are of great interest to an amateur scholar like myself.

But to slice a long story thin, Merlin cannot put the finger on this Holy Grail yet, although he is sending out parties every day to go on these quests for it. But he is a smart cookie in many another way, and one of his little tricks is to get himself coked up and then look into the future. For example, he tells King Arthur that he is going to have trouble some time ahead, and Pallagyn says he may be right, because he personally notices this Sir Lancelot making pigeon noises at Arthur's skirt. But gossip aside, one of the things Merlin sees in the future is this Cappadocian Tabouret, which is a sacred relic on which the Holy Grail is supposed to sit.

So the old hophead calls in Sir Pallagyn and says he is sending him on a quest for the glory of Britain, to get this table for the Holy Grail and bring it back.

All Merlin can do to help him is to put a spell on him and send him into the future to the time where he sees the Tabouret.

And he tells him a little about these times and this country, sprinkles a little powder on him, and all at once Pallagyn is sitting on his horse in the middle of County Trunk AA, where I find him.

"That is not exactly the easiest story in the world to believe," I remark, when Pallagyn finishes.

"Here I am," says the knight, which is about as good an answer as any.

For a minute I think I can understand how he must feel, being shipped off through Time into a new territory, without even a road map to help him. And since he is a good guy and saved my life, I figure the least I can do is try.

"Didn't this old snowbird give you a hint where it might be?" I ask.

"Merlin? Forsooth, he spoke of seeing it in a House of the Past."

"What kind of house?"

"House of the Past, methinks he named it."

"Never heard of it," I says, "unless he means a funeral parlor. And you don't catch me going into any stiff hotel."

I say this as we are driving into my yard, and I stop the truck.

"Let's grab a plate of lunch," I suggest. "Maybe we can think of something."

"Lunch?"

"Grub—hay—food."

"Here?"

"Yeah. This is my dump—house."

I salvage Pallagyn out of the car and take him inside. Then, while I fix the food, he sits there in the kitchen and asks me a thousand screwy questions. He is very ignorant about everything.

It turns out that back in his times, there is not enough civilization to put in your ear. He doesn't know what a stove is, or gas, and I can see why they call them the Dark Ages when he tells me he hasn't ever seen an electric light.

So I tell him everything, about cars and trains and airplanes and tractors and steamships, and then I break down and give him a few inside tips on how citizens live.

I hand it to him about the mobs and the rackets and the bluecoats, and politics and elections. Then I give him a few tips about science—machine guns and armored cars and tear gas and pineapples and fingerprints, all the latest stuff.

It is very hard to explain these matters to such an ignorant guy as this Pallagyn, but he is so interested and grateful that I want to give him the right steer.

I even show him how to eat with a knife and fork, as it turns out at lunch that King Arthur's court doesn't go in for fancy table manners.

But I am not a schoolteacher, and after all, we are not getting any closer to Sir Pallagyn's problem, which is snatching this Tabouret in his quest.

So I begin asking him all over again about what it is and what it looks like and where this fink Merlin said he could find it.

And all he manages to come clean with is that it's in the House of the Past, and that Merlin sees it in a jag.

"Big place," he says. "And the Tabouret is guarded by men in blue."

"Police station?" I wonder.

"It is in a transparent coffin," he says.

I never see any of these, though I hear Stinky Raffelano is buried in one when he catches his slugs last year.

"Ye can see but cannot touch it," he remembers.

All at once I get it.

"It's under glass," I tell him. "In a museum."

"Glass?"

"Never mind what that is," I say. "Sure—guards. House of the Past. It's in a museum in town."

I tell him what a museum is, and then start thinking.

"First thing to do is get a line on where it is. Then we can figure out how to pull the snatch."

"Snatch?"

"Steal it, Pal. Say—do you know what it looks like?"

"Verily. Merlin described it in utmost detail, lest I err and procure a spurious Tabouret."

"Good. Give me a line on it, will you?"

"Why, it is but a wooden tray of rough boards, with four short legs set at the corners. Brown is its hue, and it spans scarce four hands in height. Plain it is, without decoration or adornment, for it was but crudely fashioned by the good Cappadocian Fathers."

"So," I say. "I think maybe I have a notion. Wait here," I tell him, "and improve your education."

And I hand him a copy of a movie magazine. I go down to the cellar, and when I come up after a while, Sir Pallagyn comes clanking up to me, all excited.

"Pray, and who is this fair damsel?" he asks, pointing out a shot of Ann Sothern in a bathing suit. "She has verily the appearance of the Lady of the Lake," he remarks. "Albeit with more . . . more—"

"You said it, Pal," I agree. "Much more, in spades. But here—does this look like the table you're after?"

"Od's blood, it is the very thing! From whence didst thou procure it?"

"Why it's nothing but a piece of old furniture I find laying down in the basement. A footstool, but I knock the stuffing out of it and scrape off some varnish. Now, all you got to do is get this Merlin to wave his wand and call you back, and you hand him over the goods. He will never catch wise," I say, "and it will save us a lot of trouble."

Pallagyn's puss falls in a little and he starts chewing his red mustache again.

"I fear, Sir Butch, thy ethics are not of the highest. I am aquest, nor could I present a spurious Tabouret in sight of mine own conscience."

So I see I am in for it. Of course it will be easy for me to tell this tin can to go chase his quest, but somehow I feel I owe him a good turn.

"I will work things out in a jiffy, Pal. You just go out and put your nag in the stable, and when you come back, I will have things fixed up."

"On thy honor?" he says, smiling all of a sudden.

"Sure. Shake."

He shakes until his armor rattles.

"Never mind," I say. "Take care of the nag and leave it to me."

He clunks out and I get busy on the phone.

When he comes back I am set.

"Come on out and hop in the truck," I invite. "We are on our way to pick up that furniture for you."

"Indeed? Then we really quest together, Sir Butch?"

"Don't ask any questions," I remark. "On your way."

I notice he fumbles with that movie magazine a minute, and when he sees me looking he blushes.

"I wouldst carry the image of this fair lady, as is the custom of the quest," he admits, tucking the picture of Ann Sothern in his helmet, so only her legs stick out over his forehead.

"O. K. by me, Pal. But come on, we got a drive ahead of us."

I grab up a pint, the fake Tabouret, and a glass cutter; head for the truck, and we're off.

It is a long drive, and I have plenty of time to explain the lay of the land to Sir Pallagyn. I tell him how I call the museum and find out if they have this table in hock. Then I hang up and call back in a different voice, telling them that I am an express man with a suit of armor on hand for them which I will send over.

"Pretty neat, eh, Pal?" I ask.

"But I do not comprehend. How did you talk to the museum if it is in the city and—"

I do not understand the telephone so good myself, because I never see the movie "Young Tom Edison" or whatever, so I just pass it over.

"I am a wizard myself," I let it go.

"Still, I fail to perceive the plan. What place has armor in a House of the Past?"

"Why, it's a relic. Don't you know nobody wears armor no more? It's all bulletproof vests."

"Still, how doth that contrive for us to—snatch—the Tabouret?"

"Don't you get it? I'll carry you into the museum like an empty suit of armor. Then we will spot this Tabouret, I will set you down in a corner, and when the joint closes up you can snatch it very quick indeed. You can use this glass cutter to get it out, substitute this fake furniture in the case, and nobody will be hep to it the next morning. Simple."

"By're Lady, 'tis a marvel of cunning!"

I admit it sounds pat myself. But I notice we are now coming into some traffic, so I stop the truck and say, "From now on you are nothing but a suit of armor with nothing inside. You climb into the back of the truck so citizens will not give you the queer eye, and lie quiet. When we get to the museum I will drag you out, and you just hold still. Remember?"

"Verily."

So Pallagyn hops into the back of the truck and lies down and I head into the city. Before I get too far I take myself a couple of quick ones because I am a little nervous, being so long since I pulled a job.

I am not exactly floating but my feet do not touch bottom when we get downtown. Which is why I accidentally touch a fender of the car ahead of me when we stop in traffic. In fact I touch it so that it drops off.

It is a big black job, and an old Whitey with a mean-looking puss opens the door and leans out and says:

"Here now, you ruffian!"

"Who are you calling a ruffian, you bottle-nosed old baboon?" I answer, hoping to pass it off quiet.

"Aaaaargh!" says Whitey, climbing out of his buggy. "Come along, Jefferson, and help me deal with this hoodlum."

It is funny he should call me such when I feel sure he never sets peepers on me before in his life, but then it is a small world. And the chauffeur that hauls out after him is much too big to be running around in a small world. He is not only big but mean-looking, and he comes marching right at me along with old Whitey.

"Why don't you go away and soak your feet?" I suggest, still wanting to be diplomatic and avoid trouble. But Whitey does not go for my good advice.

"Let me have the number of your license," he growls. "I am going to do something about reckless drivers that smash into cars."

"Yeah," says the big chauffeur, sticking his red face into the window. "Maybe this fellow would slow down a little if he was driving with a couple of black eyes."

"Now wait a minute," I suggest. "I am very sorry if I bump into you and lose my temper, but I am on my way to the museum in a hurry with a rush order. If you look in the back of the truck, you will see a suit of armor I am delivering there."

As it turns out this is not such a hot suggestion at that. Because when I see Whitey and the chauffeur marching at me I have presence of mind to toss the whiskey bottle in the back of the truck. And now Sir Pallagyn has got a gander at it, so when Whitey hangs his nose over the side, there is Pal taking a snifter.

When he sees the old guy coming he stops still with his arm in the air, snapping his visor down with the bottle in his mouth.

"Here, what's this?" snaps Whitey.

"Huh?"

"What's that bottle doing stuck in the visor of this helmet? And what's making the arm hold on to it?"

"I don't know, mister. That's how I find it when I unpack it this morning."

"Something wrong," insists old Whitey. "They didn't drink whiskey way back then."

"It's pretty old whiskey," I tell him.

"I'll vouch for that," he says, real nasty, "if your breath is any indication. I think you ought to be run in for drunken driving."

"Say," pipes up Jefferson, the big chauffeur. "Maybe this mug doesn't even own the truck like he says. He might have stole this armor."

Whitey smiles like a desk sergeant. "I never thought of that. Now, sir"—and he wheels on me fast—"if you know so much about this particular bit of armor, perhaps you can tell me the name of its original wearer."

"Why . . . why . . . Sir Pallagyn of the Round Table," I stammer.

"Pallagyn? Pallagyn? Never heard of him," snaps Whitey. "He never sat at the Round Table."

"He was always under it," I say. "He was a lush."

"Preposterous! This is all a fraud of some sort."

"Look!" Jefferson yells. "The whiskey!"

We all look around, and sure enough the whiskey is disappearing from the bottle because Pallagyn is gargling it down very quiet.

"Fraud!" says Whitey, again, and taps the helmet with his cane.

"Come on, where you steal this from?" growls Jefferson, grabbing me by the collar. And Whitey keeps hitting the helmet.

"Desist, by blessed St. George!" roars Pallagyn, sitting up. "Desist, ere I let air through thy weasand, thou aged conskiter!"

Whitey stands there with the cane in the air and his mouth is open wide enough to hang a canary in. Pal sees the cane and grabs for his sword.

"A joust, is it?" he yells.

And all around us the citizens are honking their horns and staring out startled like, but when they see Pallagyn standing up and waving his pocketknife they drive away very fast in high.

"Robot!" mumbles Whitey.

"Rodent, am I?" and Pallagyn begins to slice away at Whitey's breadbasket.

"Hey!" yells the chauffeur, dropping me. "Cut that!" He makes a dive for the knight, but he sees him climbing up into the truck and bops him with the whiskey bottle. The big guy falls down and sits still. Whitey dances around for a minute and then runs for his car.

"I am a trustee of the museum," he bawls. "And whatever that thing is, it isn't going on display. Witchcraft, that's what it is!"

Now this is a fine time for a bluecoat to show up, but when he does I quick-motion to Pal to hold still and grab the duckfoot by the collar.

"This guy and his chauffeur back into me," I say. "And if you smell the chauffeur you see he is drunk; as a matter of fact he is passed out. That old bird is also a lush, but me," and I step on the gas, "I am in a hurry to deliver this armor to a museum, and I do not wish to press charges."

"Hey—" says the beat daddy, but I pull away fast. I am around the corner before he has time to cry "Wolf!" and I take it up several alleys.

Meanwhile I bawl out Pallagyn in all suits.

"From now on," I tell him, "you don't make a move, no matter what happens. Understand?"

"Hic," says Pallagyn.

"The only way I can get you into the museum is for you to be quiet and lay limp," I say.

"Hic."

"And stop those hiccups or it's good-by quest!"

"Hic."

"Here we are," I tell him, pulling up in back of the big gray building, into the loading zone.

"Hic."

"Shut your trap," I snarl.

Pallagyn pulls down his visor.

"No, wait." He is still hiccuping, so I yank his plume off and stuff it into his mouth.

"Now be quiet and leave it to me," I say. I get the table under one arm and slip the glass cutter into one pocket. Then I open the back of the truck and slide Pallagyn down the ramp to the ground.

"Ugh! Oooof!" he groans, under his helmet.

"Sh! Here we go!"

It is not so easy to drag Pallagyn along by the arms, but I manage to hoist him up the platform and get him past the door. There is a guard standing there.

"New armor," I tell him. "Where is your hardware department?"

"Funny. Nobody told me to expect a delivery. Oh,

well, I'll let you set it up. Dr. Peabody will probably arrange to place it tomorrow."

He looks at me, all red in the puss, trying to drag Pallagyn along.

"Funny it should be so weighty. I thought armor was light."

"This baby must be wearing heavy underwear," I tell him. "How about giving me a hand?"

He helps lift Pallagyn and we carry him through a lot of halls into a big room.

There are a lot of suits of armor standing around the walls, and several are hanging on wires from the ceiling, but I see something else and let out a snort.

Sure enough, in the center of the room is a glass case, and inside it is standing a little table just like the one I have under my arm.

I set the thing down and the guard notices it for the first time.

"What you got here?" he asks.

"The armor is supposed to stand on it," I explain. "It comes with the set."

"Oh. Well, just stand it up against the wall. I got to get back to the door."

And he goes away. I take a quick gander up and down and see the place is deserted. It is getting dark and I figure it is closing time already.

"Here we are," I whisper.

"*Hic*," says Pallagyn.

He opens his visor and takes a look at the Tabouret.

"Verily, it is that for which I seek," he whispers. "My thanks, a thousandfold."

"Forget it. Now all you got to do is wait till it gets a little darker, then make the snatch."

I go up to the case and tap it.

"Why," I say, "this is real luck. It opens from the back and you don't even have to use the glass cutter."

But Pallagyn is not paying any attention. He is looking around at the armor on the walls.

"Gawain!" he snorts.

"What?"

" 'Tis the veritable armor of Sir Gawain!" he yaps. "One of the Brotherhood of the Round Table."

"You don't say!"

"Aye—and yonder stands the coat of mail of Sir Sagramore! Indeed! I recognize the main of Eldeford, he that is cousin to Sir Kay. And Maligaint—"

He is rattling off the names of old friends, clanking around and tapping the tin, but it all looks like a bunch of spare parts in a hot car hide-out to me.

"I am among friends," he chuckles.

"Yeah? Don't be too sure. If these museum babies ever find out what you're up to, it's good-by quest. Now get to work, quick. I got to be going back." I push him over to the case. "I'll watch the door for you in case anyone is coming," I whisper. "You switch the Tabourets. Snap into it."

So I stand there, and Pallagyn makes for the case, trying not to clank too loud. It is dark and quiet, and creepy.

PALLAGYN gets the case open in no time, but he has trouble in hauling out the Tabouret, because it is nailed down.

He is grunting and yanking on it and I am shaking because he is maybe going to rouse a guard.

"I cannot say much for this guy Merlin," I comment. "He is supposed to help you knights over the hard spots, but I do not notice he has done you a good turn yet."

"Nay, I have thee to thank for my success," says Pallagyn. "For, lo, my quest is ended!"

And he rips the Tabouret loose and slides the other one in. Then he closes the glass again and marches over across the room.

Only right in the middle of it he lets out a squawk and falls down on the stone floor when his foot slips.

There is a loud crash like all hell was breaking loose.

It does.

Guys are yelling down the hall and I hear feet running this way. I get over to Pallagyn and help him up, but just as I am easing him onto his feet a squad of guards charges into the room and the heat is very much on.

"Stop, thief!" yells the guy in the lead, and the whole gang charges down on us. Pallagyn is trying to stand still again and I am yanking open a window, but when he sees them coming, Pal lets out a whoop and drops the Tabouret, waving his sword around.

"Stand back ere I skewer thy livers!" he howls. Then he turns to me. "Make haste, Sir Butch, and effect thy escape whilst I told off yon varlets."

"Give me that," I say, grabbing at the sword. "I'll hold them off and you get out of here and gallop back to your Merlin with the Bank Nite prize."

"There he is, men!" yells a new voice. Coming through the door is none other than old Whitey in person, and behind him are about eight cops. Then the cops are ahead of him, because they are coming for us, fast. A fat sergeant has his gun extremely out.

"Pendragon and England!" yells Pallagyn, patting the first cop on his bald spot with the flat side of his sword.

"Hell and damnation!" bawls the sergeant. He lets go a slug, which bounces off the helmet.

"Superman!" hollers another cop.

"Get him, boys!" screams Whitey.

It is a picnic without ants. I plant one on the sergeant's neck, and Pal wades in with his sword. But the other six push us back into a corner, and the guards come up behind them. As fast as we knock them down, the others close in. They swarm over us like a gang of Airdales on a garbage heap.

"Here we go," I gasp out, punching away.

"Be of good . . . uh . . . heart!" roars Pallagyn. He slices away. All at once he slips and the sword falls. And two coppers jump him before he can get up. The sergeant gets his gun out again and points it at me.

"Now then—" he says. The boys grab us and push us forward.

All at once Pallagyn closes his eyes. "Merlin!" he whispers. "Aid!"

Something very unusual happens here. The first thing I notice is a lot of clanking, and scraping coming from the dark corners of the room.

And then there is more noise, like Pallagyn's armor makes, only louder.

"For Arthur and England!" Pallagyn yells. "Gawain, Sagramore, Eldevord, Maligaint!—"

"Aye, we come!"

Out of the dark crashes a half dozen suits of armor; but there are men in them now. It is the armor from the walls, and I see Pallagyn's gang is here.

"Merlin sent help!" he grunts. And then he grabs his sword and wades in.

The others are whacking up the cops already, and there is a smashing of tinware. Some of the duckfeet are running and the guards make for the door. As fast as they get there, the suits of armor hanging on the walls drop down on their necks and throw them.

In a minute it is all over.

Pallagyn stands in the center of the room holding the Tabouret and all the guys in armor huddle around him.

"The quest is over," he says. "Thanks to Merlin, and Sir Butch, here—"

But I am not here any more. I am sneaking out of the window, fast, because I have had enough trouble and do not like to get mixed up in hocus-pocus or magician's unions. So I do not stay, but drop over the ledge.

Before I do so I think I see a flash of lightning or something, but cannot be sure. Anyway, I look around once more and see the museum room is empty. There are a lot of cops lying on the floor and a lot of empty suits of armor are standing around, but there is nothing in them. I look for Pallagyn's suit and it is gone. So I blink my eyes and head for the truck, which I drive the hell away from there.

THAT is how it is, and I do a lot of thinking on my way home. Also the air helps to sober me up and I remember that I have been practically drunk all the time since morning.

In fact, I am drunk since before I meet this Pallagyn if I ever do meet him and it is not my imagination.

Because when I look back in the museum I do not see him any more and I wonder if it is all something I dream up out of air and alcohol. It bothers me, and I know that whatever happens at the museum will not leak out in print, because cops are touchy about such matters and as far as they know nothing is stolen.

Then I figure maybe Thin Tommy Malloon can tell me if I drop in, so on the way home I park the car at his tavern and step inside.

Nobody is behind the bar but Bertram, and when he sees me he is very polite.

"I would like to speak with Thin Tommy," I say.

Bertram gulps. "He is upstairs lying down," he says. "In fact he does not feel so chipper since you bop him in the belly this morning."

"What do you mean *I* bop him?" I ask. "My buddy does that."

"You come in alone," Bertram tells me. He gives me a long look, but there are customers in the joint so I just shrug and walk out.

So the rest of the way home I am no better off, because I figure either Bertram is lying to me or I am nuts. And right now I would just as soon be a little nuts as admit anything so screwy could happen.

Which is how it stands with me. I am sober, and I am done with chasing around for the day. If I lay off drinking shellac, I will not see any more knights in armor with dopey stories about magicians and quests. I will let bygones be bygones and be a good boy.

That suits me, so I back the car into the garage.

And then I get out and start cursing all over again.

All at once I know for sure whether or not it all happens.

Because standing there in the garage is that dizzy nag with the mask over the head that I have Sir Pallagyn put into the stable.

Do you know anybody who wants to buy a horse, cheap?

THE END.

PRESCIENCE

By Nelson S. Bond

● The doctor was mentally balanced because he had no fear of any afterlife; he knew there was none. Tales to scare children, no more—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

His visitor said fearfully, "It's that way whenever I'm in a crowded room, doctor. Or if I walk down a street at noon hour. Sometimes I want to scream and kick and fight my way clear of the throng that binds me in—"

Dr. Barton said, "Yes. Yes, I quite understand." But his tone was not entirely sympathetic. It was brusque, hurried, impatient. He said, "Mr. Peebles, I am going to give you these tablets. Keep them on your person. Whenever you feel one of these . . . er . . . nervous attacks coming on, take a tablet."

"I . . . I'm afraid you don't quite understand, doctor. I don't need sedatives. There's nothing wrong with me physically. I've been examined thoroughly by expert diagnosticians. And I—"

"My *dear* Mr. Peebles!" Dr. Barton rose. "Believe me when I say I understand your case perfectly. If you will just confide your fears to my keeping—"

He let his words dwindle off. The patient colored, impressed. He scraped his chair backward, picked up the tablets and faltered toward the door.

"Yes, doctor. I didn't mean to offend you. If you think I'll be all right—"

"Of course, Mr. Peebles. Now, you may return Thursday, if you will. Good day, sir."

The visitor ducked out. Dr. Barton's eyes filmed,

mirroring the distaste he felt. For a lingering moment he continued to stare at the door panel. Then he dropped into his chair, muttering petulantly.

Dr. Barton was quite fed up with neurotics. And that was particularly awkward because he—Dr. Homer Barton—was numbered among the town's most eminent and accomplished psychiatrists.

Into his soothing, apple-green walled office, during the past twelve years, had crept a steady stream of patients suffering an infinitude of mental ailments. He had seen, and spoken with, and treated all kinds from mild claustrophobiacs to weeping persecutionists.

Ofttimes his quiet, competent manner had brought about cures. At other times he had succeeded in arresting partly developed cases. He had known failure, too. The big, white hospital on the Hill held some of them; held them in thickly padded rooms, behind doors barred with steel.

But Dr. Barton was utterly fed up with neurotic people. He voiced his grievance, now, to the nurse who had opened the door and was silently waiting his attention.

"Fools, Miss Allen!" he snapped. "They're fools—the whole lot of them! Neuroses—bah! Phobias and complexes—bah! Fundamentally, there is but one thing that bothers all of them. Fear!"

Miss Allen said, "Yes, doctor. There is a—"

"Fear!" repeated Dr. Barton bitterly. "And do you know *what* it is they fear, Miss Allen? I do. It is not open or closed spaces. Animals or sharp points or height. Heat or cold or any of those multitudinous things they whine and complain to me about. Those are but substitutes; manifestations of the one basic fear that possesses all of them.

"They fear, Miss Allen—death! Twelve years in this horrible occupation has convinced me that there is but one factor underlying all the complexes and phobias of my patients. They are afraid to die. And since their puny minds refuse to acknowledge the cause of their fear, their subconscious gives them a palliative. A secondary fear to supplant the real one they dare not name, even to themselves!"

Miss Allen nodded understandingly. She said, "Then that should make their cure even more simple, doctor. Or am I too optimistic?"

"Barring physiological defects," continued Barton, musing, "little children are completely sane. Why? Because they do not fear death. There is relatively little insanity among aborigines; the so-called 'backward' or 'pagan' people. Nor among the laboring classes of our race.

"*I* would never become a mental case, Miss Allen, because I am a fundamentalist. I do not needlessly torture myself with vain ponderings on my after life. I accept, calmly and as a matter of fact, the credo that the real 'I' is everlasting; imperishable.

"With this comfort, with the assurance that death holds no horrors for me, my mind is balanced."

He looked at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"Excuse me," he said. "I did not mean to bother you with my annoyance, but I am so everlastingly weary of soothing frightened people—"

Nurse Allen knew her employer's moods perfectly.

"Yes, doctor," she said. "There is a Mrs. Williams waiting. Shall I show her in?"

"Not today," said Barton. "Ask her to come back tomorrow. I'm tired."

"But if you'll excuse me, doctor, she's been waiting more than an hour—"

Barton shrugged. After all, this *was* his business. A business which paid him handsomely.

"Oh, very well!" he said resignedly. "Show her in."

"Yes, sir." The nurse vanished. When the door opened softly, a few seconds later, Dr. Barton's ire had completely disappeared. He was a living model of complacency; a twentieth century soothsayer sitting behind a soft, rubbed walnut desk, hands folded before him with the smooth quietude of a reflecting Buddha. He rose as his patient entered.

"Mrs. Williams? Please be seated."

She was a drab little woman. For a moment he could not help wondering where she had heard of him, or even if he had been wise in admitting her. Her clothes were definitely not Fifth Avenue. Her hands were work-coarsened and red. A shopgirl, possibly, or somebody's cook. She could never afford to pay Dr. Barton's prices if this were so—

"I came to see you, doctor," she said, "because I could not stay away any longer. And my employer, Mrs. Rand, said you were wonderful at solving troubles of the—mind?"

"Mrs. Rand? Dr. Barton remembered her dimly. An elderly woman with nervous indigestion. Her trouble, treated by a general practitioner, was late hours and overrich food. Dr. Barton had given it a fancy name—he had long since learned the layman's love for polysyllables—and suggested a course in Yoga. The Yoga concept had given Mrs. Rand something to think about. The enforced rigidity of diet had effected a cure.

"Yes, Mrs. Williams. And your trouble—?"

The little woman twisted a handkerchief nervously.

"I . . . I see things, doctor. I see them before they actually happen."

Dr. Barton's face remained placid, but he yawned mentally. There were no variations in this job. Only the same recurrent themes, over and over again. But he said politely, "Yes? Go on, please."

"It is something with which I have been gifted—or cursed—ever since I was a little girl. But lately it has happened with such frequency, almost every time I go to bed, as a matter of fact, that it . . . it frightens me.

"I have dreams—but they are not dreams. For within a few weeks, or a few days, that scene which is so clear to me in my dream actually *happens!*"

She looked at him hopefully. "Did you ever hear of anything like that before?"

Dr. Barton avoided answering. Of course he had. Everyone had. But he said, noncommittally, "Please go on."

"Three nights ago, for instance, I dreamed that I was in a strange room. A room I had never seen before in my life. It was the drawing room of a large house, and somehow I was aware that I had come after something.

"As I was wondering what this thing was, a strange lady appeared in the doorway. She held out to me an oblong box.

" 'Can you identify this?' she asked.

" 'I'll try, ma'am,' I said. I opened the box. In it lay a pair of white evening gloves which belonged to my mistress, Mrs. Rand.

" 'Yes, ma'am,' I said in my dream. 'These belong to Mrs. Rand.'

" 'Then you may take them to her,' said the strange lady. 'And here's a little gift for your trouble.' And she gave me a dollar bill. I remember it particularly because it had— Here, I'll show you!"

Mrs. Williams dug into a worn handbag; brought out a dollar bill which she passed across the desk to the doctor. Barton looked at it.

"That red ink blot." said Mrs. Williams. "That was the identifying mark on the dollar bill the lady gave me in my dream."

Barton handed back the bill. He said, "But you got this bill where, Mrs. Williams?"

"This morning," said the little woman, "Mrs. Rand was very excited. Last night at the opera she mislaid her evening gloves. She telephoned an advertisement to the newspapers at once.

"Early this afternoon, she received a call from a lady in Westchester. A perfect stranger. And since Thomas, the chauffeur, had driven Mr. Rand downtown, Mrs. Rand asked *me* to go out after the gloves."

"And then—?"

"When I got there," said Mrs. Williams, "into that house, I knew *instantly* it was the one I had visited in my dream two nights before. I even knew what was going to happen. But I couldn't do anything about it.

"It was a dreadful feeling. I felt captive; bound by a chain too strong for breaking. I saw the lady, strange no longer, appear in the doorway. I watched her lips open as if fascinated. I knew she was going to say, 'Can you identify this?'—and she did. I knew what I was going to say. And I tried to stop myself; to say something different. Somehow I had an idea if I could only change the words, something important would come about—"

"Well?" said Barton.

Mrs. Williams shook her head miserably. "It was no use. The words came from my lips and I couldn't stop them. I said, 'Yes, ma'am. These belong to Mrs. Rand—' "

Dr. Barton tried hard not to frown. He was more than ever disgusted with his occupation. The same old groove, over and over again. Escape mechanisms! A drab little woman, dissatisfied with her lot, knowing that she would soon leave this earth. Who subconsciously projected her servile present into the past, attributing to herself strange powers—

"Is it . . . does it mean anything, doctor?" asked the little woman fearfully.

Dr. Barton's impatience rose suddenly. After all, this was no wealthy patient who must be cajoled and deferred to and handled with kid gloves. He said:

"Mrs. Williams, yours is not at all an unusual case. The phenomenon which troubles you is as old as the history of mankind, has been studied and discussed since the days of the first doctors.

"I think I should tell you that, despite what you may think, you did *not* dream this first, then have the event happen to you. Actually, you experienced what the philosopher, Henri Bergson, calls 'the memory of the present.'

"*This* is what happened. You entered a strange house. You were a trifle tired, or hungry, or affected by a touch of the sun. Possibly excited by an unaccustomed responsibility. However that may be, your nervous system suffered a momentary synapse—a breaking of the nervous current, as an electrical current may be disturbed by a bolt of lightning.

"That brief fraction of a second sufficed to erase from your mind, completely, all which had gone before. Thus, when you . . . er . . . snapped out of your mental hiatus, it seemed to you that you had 'been through this scene before.' While actually, it was the *first* time you had ever witnessed it."

The little woman wrung her handkerchief annoyingly.

"But . . . but, doctor," she cried. "The dollar bill? I remembered it from the dream."

Dr. Barton said, "Nonsense! The human mind remembers, consciously, that which it wishes to remember. You say you have this experience often. Has it ever occurred to you to rise from your sleep and write down one of these episodes? So that later you might check the dream against a happening?"

"No, sir. I never remember the dream until the scene is presented—"

"Exactly! In other words, it is just what I told you it was." Dr. Barton rose. "If you will take my advice, Mrs. Williams, it would be well for you to stop worrying."

"Worrying, doctor?" Mrs. Williams rose uncertainly. "But I'm not worrying about anything. I have sufficient money for my needs. I have no children. I—"

"I strongly suspect, madam," said Barton caustically, "you are worrying about the salvation of your soul. You fear the afterworld. Therein lies your reason for dreaming these strange daydreams. Good day, Mrs. Williams."

The little woman flushed. She scrabbled in her old handbag. There were tears in her eyes; Dr. Barton saw them not with compassion, but with annoyance.

"There is no charge, Mrs. Williams," he said gruffly. "It has been a pleasure to be able to tell someone the cold truth for a change. The truth that most people are cowards."

"Yes, doctor," said the little woman humbly. Then, halfway to the door, "But if I have one of these experi-

ences again—? Is there anything I should do?"

"There is nothing. You must not—"

Dr. Barton stopped suddenly. Never had his exasperation been so great. Now a great thought came to him. He had no wealthy client in this patient. Why not use her as a guinea pig? At one time allay her fears for evermore—and prove his own theory. His brow cleared. He smiled.

"Mrs. Williams?" he said.

The woman turned hopefully. "Yes, doctor?"

"You say you have these dreams frequently?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Then come with me. I think I can cure your case."

It was to his smaller office that he led her. There he had a small cot for invalid patients; a number of impressive machines used in treating those whose cases demanded imposing paraphernalia.

"Lie down, Mrs. Williams," he said. Gone was Dr. Barton's impatience now. He was once again the suave psychiatrist, handling with smooth deftness a nerve-wracked victim of strain. "Right here. That's right.

"Now—relax. Stretch if you want to. Ease all your muscles. There—that's right. Look up, now, please—"

He snapped a switch. In the quiet gloom of the room one tiny light began to flicker. A many-faceted globe in the machine which was suspended just over the patient's head. It swirled into motion. The facets caught the light, shifted them into dancing colors.

"Don't look away, Mrs. Williams. Look at the light. There—that's right. See how soothing it is? So pleasant. So relaxing. And you are tired . . . tired . . . terribly tired—"

There was no sound save the somewhat heavier breathing of the patient. The distant hum of the machine. Dr. Barton spoke again in a whisper.

"Now you are sleeping . . . sleeping. Aren't you, Mrs. Williams?"

The little woman's voice was like a wisp from far away.

"I . . . am sleeping—"

Dr. Barton smiled sardonically. There was no problem here. She was more susceptible than most to hypnotism. That indicated a receptive will. No wonder she had been prey to these repetitive dreams.

He said, "Are you dreaming now, Mrs. Williams. Tell me your dream?"

"I am . . . dreaming . . . doctor."

"Tell me."

The woman's voice was slow, faltering, unaccented.

"I am . . . in my room. It is night . . . I think . . . because the lights are on. But not . . . for long. I am . . . getting ready for bed . . . now I am turning off the lights—"

There was a long silence. Dr. Barton said, "And now, Mrs. Williams?"

"It is dark . . . but there is a light from the street lamp outside. I am . . . shifting . . . turning. I am restless. It seems there is something . . . I am trying to remember . . . something important. But I cannot quite . . . remember what it is—"

Again silence. Barton smiled. He persisted, "Yes?"

"I do not know . . . I am asleep . . . now—"

Barton almost laughed aloud. Asleep! That should amuse his fellow psychiatrists. He had hypnotized a woman into believing she was asleep! Sleep within sleep—

Despite himself, he started. For suddenly from Mrs. Williams' throat had burst a gasp; a startled cry. Swiftly he touched her pulse. It was strong; almost too strong. It was pounding as though from panic.

"Yes, Mrs. Williams?" he purred excitedly. "A dream has come to you?"

"No! No! I am awake again! There is redness . . . in my room. It is . . . fire! I can . . . feel the heat!" Her voice rose. "I am . . . climbing out of my bed. I . . . run to the door . . . but the panels are . . . too hot. I dare not . . . open it—

"Now I am . . . running to the window. I . . . throw it . . . open. I climb out. The fire escape . . . is cold against . . . my bare feet—"

Dr. Barton nodded silently. Strange how detailed these fear dreams were. Fire, now. That was a convincing proof of his theory. Had not mankind, from time immemorable, conjoined thoughts of heat and flame with their dread of the afterworld? Like the others, this little woman feared death. And with that fear in her subconscious, she dreamed such dreams as this—

Her voice went on; harsh with horror.

"I hear . . . the wailing of sirens . . . and the screams . . . of people in the streets . . . below. I am . . . climbing down the . . . fire escape now. A burst of flame . . . licks from one of the windows . . . and scorches my . . . hands.

"But I am nearing . . . safety. . . . The crackling of fire . . . sounds in my ears . . . and I am panting. . . . Just a few more . . . steps—"

Dr. Barton frowned. He saw, now, what he must do. He must teach this woman, once and for all, that dreams are not harmful things. That this fire, this flame, this awful heat and the fear of impending death lived only in her mind. He spoke curtly.

"Do you hear me, Mrs. Williams?"

"The house is crumbling . . . into ruin—" A pause; a shifting of the head as though hearing a far-away sound. "I . . . hear you . . . doctor—"

"You must not avoid this fire," said Barton crisply. "It cannot hurt you. It is but a dream; a hallucination. I tell you, you are lying in your bed, asleep. This is only a dream."

"A . . . dream?"

"Yes. Only a dream, Mrs. Williams. Now you must go back into the house. Is there a window near you?"

"There is . . . a window . . . but from it leap . . . red tongues of . . . flame. The heat burns me . . . even as I wait—"

"You must go in the window!" said Barton firmly.

"I command you to go into the window. The fire will turn cool before you. You will not be harmed! Go in!"

Before him, the little woman's body twisted as if in an agony of indecision.

"I . . . cannot . . . doctor."

"You must! Enter the window!"

"Yes . . . doctor." A brief silence. Then, "I am . . . entering . . . the window. But it is hot . . . now the fire . . . the great flames—*Ooooh!*"

Her scream shattered the throbbing silence of the room into tattered fragments of sound. Despite himself, Barton felt a shudder course coldly through him. There was stark agony in that scream. Torment and fear and anguish. But he steeled himself to speak.

"You see, Mrs. Williams? There was nothing to fear. You are safe. You are all right now?"

Only the faint humming of the machine. The distant sound of the woman's labored breathing. Dr. Barton spoke again, sharply.

"You are all right now?"

And then the answer. In a dreary voice. A toneless voice. "I am . . . all right . . . now."

"Good. There is no heat?"

"There is . . . no heat."

"Now you will return to your room. Find your bed, lie down in it. Sleep once more."

Brief silence. Then, "I cannot find . . . my room. I cannot find . . . my bed—"

"Then you are still dreaming, Mrs. Williams. What is your dream now? What do you see?"

"There is . . . no heat. I cannot find . . . my room. It is dark. I am still dreaming. I see nothing . . . in my dream . . . but writhing darkness. I stand alone . . . on a vast, empty plain. But I am not alone. Mists surround me. And out of the mists—"

Dr. Barton was startled at what happened then, so unexpected was it. The woman's voice changed suddenly; her throat was torn with a wild and terrifying scream. Then came laughter. A wild cacaphony of sound like that which sometimes echoed from the cells of the great, white building on the Hill.

Words began tumbling from her lips. Madly. Wildly. Gloatingly. As she told what she saw. Told it in its every revolting detail. Every intricate little movement and meaning. Words, thoughts, ideas of evil older than Earth itself poured from her.

For stark seconds, Barton listened, horrified. It was incredible that the mind of a demure little woman like this should be host to such thoughts; that from her lips could spill such a repugnant stream. The things she told were such that even Dr. Barton, experienced psychiatrist as he was, tasted the weak bile of disgust on his lips.

The creatures she envisioned in her dreaming were the embodiment of sheer horror; her hateful words swept all the cleanliness and good from the thing called Man, made him a stinking creature asquat in a mire of abomination!

With a swift motion, Dr. Barton touched the ray switch, flicked it off. The humming ceased. The light ended its flickering. Dr. Barton called, "Mrs. Williams—waken! I command you to wake!"

The body on the cot stirred, opened its eyes. Mrs. Williams, meek, humble again, rose to a sitting posture.

"Yes, doctor. What is it you want me to do?"

"It is already done, Mrs. Williams." Dr. Barton could scarcely realize that from this quiet creature's lips, a moment ago, had flooded words and thoughts unspeakable in their vileness. "Our experiment is finished."

"And did you . . . I mean, is everything—?"

"You will be all right now," promised Barton. "You will dream no more, I believe."

He did not tell her about the final stage of her dreaming. It was enough that he had allayed her fears. He felt certain, did Dr. Barton, that there would be in the future no more prescient dreams—

Dr. Barton saw no more patients that afternoon. He found time for a round of golf before sundown; after that he had dinner at the club and enjoyed a movie in the evening. He went home and slept soundly. His mind was untroubled, for Dr. Barton was prey to no personal neuroses, phobias, or complexes. His code of living was simple. His philosophy of life admitted no hindering fear of an afterworld. And on such fear, he knew, was based all of mankind's mental ailments.

The next morning he arrived at his office ready for a new day's work. Miss Allen was already there. She had an open newspaper on the desk before her. She greeted him with excitement and horror.

"—a most *dreadful* thing last night, doctor!" she said. "I can hardly believe it. You remember that little Mrs. Williams who came here yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"Oh, it's terrible! Last night a fire broke out in Mrs. Rand's home, and—"

"What!" Dr. Barton's face paled. "Let me see!" He clutched the newspaper, found the account.

—firemen had the conflagration under control and all members of the Rand family were rescued. The housekeeper, a Mrs. Williams, was the only victim. She was seen to climb from her bedroom window to the fire escape and make her way down to within a few steps of safety.

Then, apparently overcome by the heat, she stopped and deliberately stepped back into the heart of the fire, into a dining-room window. Observers believe she must have died instantly—

Died instantly! That scream! That sudden change in manner!

"What is it, Dr. Barton?" cried Miss Allen. "Oh, Dr. Barton, what *is* it?"

But Dr. Barton, philosopher and scientist, did not hear. He did not even know that his trembling hands had dropped the paper, that his eyes were bleak and staring, nor that from his throat there bubbled such mad, inchoate laughter as often echoed from the cells of the big, white building on the Hill—

THE END.

FINGER! FINGER!

By Margaret Ronan

● The utterly malign old woman had defeated her in a final and horrible way—but left her the possibility still of one small shred of vengeance—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

WHEN the tray was laid out, Carola took it from Mrs. Higginson and went out into the hall.

"Careful," Mrs. Higginson called after her. "The cream pitcher's too full."

It was. Some had already spilled on the cloth, but Carola did not stop now to wipe it up. Breakfast was late enough, and Miss Amanda, lying upstairs, would be hungry. That was all there was left for her to be, Higginson had remarked more than once.

Carola's shadow moved carefully to heel all the way upstairs. It was a stockily built shadow, like Carola herself, but it lacked her full white throat and the warm brown hair that smoothed her head with the iridescence of water. Elbows out to accent the balance of the tray, girl and shadow climbed with a self-conscious deliberation.

Just outside Miss Amanda's door, Carola stopped and put down the tray. She was more nervous now, her hand uncertain about rearranging her apron, smoothing her hair, setting the cap farther back. It was her first day. Her first place, she reminded herself with some severity. Taking a corner of the apron, she mopped at the spilt cream and set the pitcher over the spot it had left. Then, with the tray in one hand,

she lifted her free hand to knock. But the voice, leaping as it did from the other side of the door, was too quick for her.

"Come in! I hear you out there!"

Carola got the door open awkwardly and closed it after her. She crossed the room and set the tray down on the night table. Her smile felt stiff as she turned toward the old woman who lay beneath the spread of quilts.

Miss Amanda. This was Miss Amanda. She was incredibly fat, this old woman, bloated. Higginson said she had not walked in forty-odd years. Her face had the bloodlessness of dough. It lay in bleached folds, as if there was no skull behind it, only pillows. Over her the bedclothes struggled into hills and gullies, and above this landscape she watched Carola with wicked, buried little eyes.

"You must be the new girl," she said. "What's your name?"

"Carola, ma'am."

"Oh." The little eyes were not amused, but Miss Amanda's mouth began to be. Out of the great, gross face a tiny smile came. "You're very young, aren't you?"

It was the look, the tone of voice, the whole stuffy bedroom which made Carola feel the question to be too personal, too prying. But that was silly. The old lady was only being kind. Carola fixed her eyes on a yellow patch in one of the quilts and answered, "Sixteen, ma'am."

Miss Amanda considered this in silence until the three china clocks stationed in the room gained a new resonance, and the yellow patch wavered before Carola's eyes. If she had been able, she would have gone about putting the tray on Miss Amanda's knees, plumping up the pillows behind the mountainous back. But that was the odd thing. Just now she could not think of the tray and do something about it at the same time. Her hands felt as if they had gone to sleep, and in spite of her brain's dull warning, she found her eyes pulling away from the yellow patch, up over the hills and gullies, to stop at last on Miss Amanda's face.

Then the crystal void snapped without warning. Sound and object leaped back into focus.

There was the patch on the quilt again, and other patches like it. There was Miss Amanda's faintly smiling face. Carola felt at once confused and angry. She heard herself repeating the word "breakfast" over and over like an idiot. She pulled at her apron, the blood hot and thick in her throat.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," she muttered. "I can't think what came over me."

Miss Amanda closed her eyes and opened them again slowly. She did not appear to have heard Carola's apology.

"Yes, you're young," she murmured. "Not pretty, but young. When I was your age I was a beauty. Black hair and a skin like flowers. I had more proposals than I could listen to." She struck her great, unfeeling body. "Slim, I was. Not thick-waisted, like you." Her smile seeped away into the flesh again. "But I was lying here, paralyzed, before I knew what it really meant to be young and lovely and strong."

Carola did not know what to say. She could feel no real pity for the old woman. At the moment she only wanted to get out of the room and back to Higginson and the kitchen. A pain had begun to throb in her head, pound at her ears. But Miss Amanda did not dismiss her.

"Have you a young man, Carola?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Put the tray here, Carola. That's right. Now push up the pillows, will you? There, much better." She sank back against the linen and patted the curve of the sugar bowl languidly. "Two lumps."

Carola picked up the sugar tongs, and it was then that Miss Amanda caught her left arm, just above the wrist. The two women looked at each other for a long moment; Miss Amanda with a sly, reminiscent grin, Carola bewildered and uneasy. With her little finger held fastidiously away from its fellows, the old woman's right hand began to stroke Carola's arm. Up and down, up and down. Once she pinched it gently, and the smile deepened. Then the slow, heavy caress was resumed. It had the insinuating, boneless pressure of a snake's weight.

"I'm not like most old women, Carola," Miss Amanda murmured. "I'm not like you'd think. You can't put me off with food. There are other things, and I haven't forgotten those other things. You think because you're young you can have them all to yourself, but you mustn't be selfish."

Eagerness crystallized in the little eyes, lay like a film over the wet, sly grin.

"So you have a young man. What's his name?"

"Donald, ma'am."

"Donald, eh? Tell me about him. Is he tall? Strong? Very strong? Tell me how strong he is, Carola. Tell me how he makes love to you."

Carola forgot caution and jerked her arm away. She felt strangled. She felt she might be very sick unless she got away from the bed, the china clocks, the fastidious lifted little finger.

Miss Amanda seemed to lose interest. Her face grew blank, the eyelids drooped. She began to dissect an egg carefully, her little finger still held aloof.

"Get along, Carola," she said. "Come back in half an hour for the tray."

All the way down the stairs Carola fought back tears. Dirty-minded old beast! She wanted to scream, to break the hanging lamp above the lower landing—anything to ease the clotted tears behind her eyelids. Donald, Donald, Donald! She said the name over and over to herself like a kind of hysterical apology. She told herself she didn't care if the old woman sacked her that very day. Donald, Donald!

She went into the kitchen, brushing past Higginson before the older woman should see her eyes. At the

sink she turned on the tap and began to wash her hands and arms, running the water over them in a clear, swift stream.

"Now what's eating you?" Higginson asked with mild interest.

"Nothing," Carola muttered.

"Have a set-to with the old lady?" said Higginson. "Well, she's not easy to work for. You've got to watch your step. She's a queer one! The girls that's been here and gone! We was without one for near six months until you come." She settled herself into a chair and prepared to elaborate. "That's the truth. Some of 'em, the younger ones, took to behaving queer themselves after they was here awhile. They'd go around imitating Miss Amanda, the cheeky bits! Crooking out their little fingers like she does, sliding their eyes around—even talking like her sometimes. It was enough to give a body the creeps. There was one—girl about your age, I'd say. She was the worst of the lot when it came to imitating the old lady. Kept it up for about a month or so, and then the first thing we knew she'd gone and hung herself down there in the orchard. No reason anyone could find, either. Stood on a kitchen chair to reach the branch, she did. This very chair!" Higginson slapped the chair back triumphantly. "Couldn't nobody, not even the police, make anything out of it, and they was here long enough about it, tracking up the place!"

Carola did not answer. She was crying quietly, but not for the girl Higginson was talking about.

"Well!" said Higginson. "Don't take on so. You can't be so queasy in this work. Old women will say their say, and it's your place to listen and keep still. And stop running that water! You've washed your hands so long that there's likely no hide left to them!"

With the growth of the day, her headache grew steadily worse. It made her absent-minded and nervous. She washed up the breakfast dishes, peeled vegetables, scrubbed out the pantry. Noon came, and the luncheon tray was taken up and brought back down. Miss Amanda scarcely spoke to her. Carola watched the afternoon hours crawl through aching eyes. She broke a dish, she forgot what Higginson had told her about the stove flue. Her hands shook like rags in a wind whenever she tried to lift anything. Four o'clock. Five thirty. Six o'clock. At eight, Donald would be by with his wagon and team to take her home. Behind her forehead the pain was a hot, tight band.

"You'd better mind what you're about, my girl," Higginson told her crossly.

Carola set her teeth against the sick pounding of her skull and took the supper tray from Higginson. She would be careful. She wouldn't spill anything. But when she entered the bedroom, the dumb feeling of outrage swept over her again so that the tray shook in her hands. For a moment she almost hoped the old woman would say something, would attempt to repeat her sly caress. Then, thought Carola, it would be time and cause for striking out—for hitting at that useless body, clawing the evil, bloated face to strips. She put down the tray with a sense of shock. What had come over her? She had never thought things like that in her life! And her head had never hurt so.

But the meal went off without incident, and Carola was through with the dishes and waiting in the kitchen when Donald came. As she buttoned her coat, she could see his wagon through the window, see him sitting atop it, lazily flicking flies from the horses with his whip. She thought with satisfaction of his quick temper. He would probably burn this house down if she told him what the old lady had said to her. She put on her hat, and then Miss Amanda's bell jangled. Twice.

"That's for you," Higginson said. "You'd better go up and see what she wants. Don't fidget. Your young man will wait. I'll tell him you've been held up."

Carola looked at the woman desperately and went. She felt she could not bear the sight of Miss Amanda again that day. But there was the bedroom door. She opened it and went in.

"Going, Carola?" asked Miss Amanda sweetly. "But of course! How stupid I'm getting. There's someone waiting for you, isn't there? I can see him through the window here if I pull myself up a little. There! Is that your Donald?"

"Yes, ma'am," Carola answered quickly. "Did you want something, ma'am?" She thought, "If you say anything more, I'll walk out. I'll tell Donald. I'll never come back."

But all Miss Amanda said was: "Very well. But before you go, I wish you'd take away one of these pillows. I can't sleep with all of them."

Carola might have been more wary. She might have run then, out of the room, away from the chiming of the china clocks and the twisting of the old, unquiet hands. But Miss Amanda's voice was fretful and complaining, the way an old woman's has a right to be. And Carola went up to the bed to do as she was told.

"That's better," said Miss Amanda. "Much better."

Suddenly her hands clamped over Carola's shoulders, forcing her down on the bed, holding her so that the girl's frightened face was only an inch from her own. Those hands were very strong. One of them alone was quite capable of keeping Carola where she was.

"Let me go!" Carola gasped. She could hardly force her voice out of her dry, throbbing throat. The headache cut into her brain. It caught fire with what Miss Amanda was saying.

"Not just now, Carola. You see, you're not going to meet your lover, Carola. Never again. But he won't be disappointed. He won't ever know. How should he, when you aren't even Carola any more—Carola-carolacarola—"

The voice seemed to come now from the old eyes. It gathered about Carola and held her. It became part of the roaring pain within her, part of the silly china clocks scratching away at time. She heard the wind

and the darkness, and then the old face vanished, leaving only the pits of eyes. Only two pits which became one, a pulling well of night which she plunged down, down.

And then the room was quiet. The aching left her skull, became a weakness so intense that it was like fire. It spread down through her thighs, her ankles, her feet. They stretched out before her, massive, covered with quilts. Quilts that seemed to have no weight.

With a speechless fascination she watched herself, in a brown, high-buttoned coat, get up from the bed, cross the room, open the door and go out. The footsteps went swiftly down the stairs, but she could not follow them. She could not even get to the mirror to find out why the little finger of her right hand should be crooked out like that. She could not do any of these things because, as she realized with a slow horror, she had not walked in more than forty years, and would never walk again!

The room spun, then settled. She realized almost immediately that although she was imprisoned, she was not helpless. The bell rope hung from the head of her bed, just to the left. The alien, bloated arm moved to her will, sent peal after peal to halt the retreating feet on the stairs.

She remembered words the old, wet mouth had said: *"There's someone waiting for you, isn't there? I can see him through the window if I pull myself up a little."*

And Carola, at the thought of Donald and the Thing which wore her body, dragged the leaden weight up on the pillows, clung to the bedposts, and saw him also. Down there in the yard, slouched on the wagon seat, handsome, careless. His face turned to the light which streaked through the open kitchen door. He smiled at the girl who came through that door to the wagon.

"Well, Carola," he called to that girl, "you've kept me a time, you have." His voice stabbed clearly through the bedroom window and through Carola.

She saw the face which had been hers laughing up at Donald. She saw him put out his arms to lift the girl up beside him. But he never did, for with one heavy hand, Carola flung open the bedroom window and screamed at them in a voice she had never spoken with before.

"Stop, thief! Thief!"

She pulled herself around so that she hung over the window sill. Below, Higginson came running from the kitchen door to stare upward. Donald and the girl stared up at her also, their faces frozen with surprise. Words formed cool and whole in her brain. She knew exactly what to do.

"My rings!" she screamed to Higginson. "That girl's got my rings!"

The face below which had been hers, arched its white neck in protest. Whatever the strength of Miss Amanda's will, the body it ruled now was no match for Higginson's strength. Outraged, the cook caught the girl's arm, jerked her out of Donald's reach and into the house. For a moment Donald sat stunned. Then he jumped to the ground. He looked more bewildered than angry.

"I don't know what this is all about," he shouted after Higginson, "but you're not taking her in there alone. I'm coming, too!"

He spoke prematurely. Higginson, having reached the house, shoved her prisoner inside. Then she waited in the doorway just long enough to give Donald a push which threw him off balance. The door slammed in his face, and did not open again in response to his furious knocking.

CAROLA CLOSED the window so that the knocking dulled and was no louder than her heart. She sank back against the pillows to wait. Higginson evidently had the girl in hand. She was attempting to force her up the stairs to the bedroom, and their footsteps came shuffled and uneven to Carola, broken once by scuffling. Then the door opened and Higginson pushed the girl inside.

"You can go, Higginson," said Carola. "I'll attend to this alone."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll send for the police if you say so, but she ought to be made to give up your rings first. I thought I could—"

"The police," Carola murmured. "Yes, the police. Call them and then come back."

"You can't keep me here forever, you know," she heard Amanda say in the warm, young voice. "When the police come, they'll find all the rings locked in that box on the bureau. They'll put you down for a trouble-making old woman and maybe leave it at that. But they'll let me go—and I'll take Donald with me! Your precious Donald!"

She said this over twice again, coming closer to the bed as she spoke. When she was near enough she leaned over and almost spat out the last words at the old, watchful face.

As if the scene had happened a hundred times before, Carola knew what she must do. Beneath the young face was a young, white neck. Carola had not known that the old hands could move so quickly, that the girl's throat would fit them so well. The strength of the fingers filled her with an almost unbearable pleasure.

Feet were coming up the stairs outside before Carola released the dead throat. A policeman's tread, heavy and impersonal. For a moment she only listened and waited, then her brain roused with alarm. Not only the old legs were paralyzed now. She could not take her eyes from the terrible strength of those fingers, hooked to fit a girl's neck. Nine hooked fingers. The tenth had thrust itself out fastidiously.

Higginson's voice preceded the policeman in the hall. It came clearly through the bedroom door.

"In here," she was saying, "and time you showed up. It's a pity honest folk have to go *looking* for you when there's trouble! The old lady's bedridden, too, and what's the law for if it's not to protect the likes of her, I want to know?"

THE END.

BORROWED GLORY

By L. Ron Hubbard

● For a single day of glory—and the settlement of a small dispute among immortals—a life might pay, and be a satisfactory price—

Illustrated by Orban

"HUMAN beings," said Tuffaron, familiarly known as the Mad Genii, "are stupid and willful. They derive intense enjoyment from suffering or else they would not bend all their efforts toward suffering."

He sat back upon the hot rock this hotter day and gazed off into the dun wilderness, stroking high fang to give himself an air of contemplation and wisdom.

Georgie bustled her wings with resentment. Her lower lip protruded and her usually angelic countenance darkened. "Know-it-all!" she taunted. "Conceited know-it-all!"

"That is no way for an angel to talk, Georgie," said Tuffaron.

"Conceited, bloated, know-it-all!" she cried and then and there felt a growing desire to kick his huge column of a leg. Of course she wouldn't for that would not be exactly an expression of love for everything. "Prove it!" she demanded.

"Why," said Tuffaron the Mad Genii in his most lofty tone, "human beings prove it themselves."

"You evade me. You are the stupid one!" said Georgie. "I dare you to put that matter to test. Hu-

man beings are very nice, very, very nice and I love them. So there!"

"You are under orders to love everything, even human beings," said Tuffaron. "And why should I exert myself to labor a point already too beautifully established?"

"Coward!" said Georgie.

Tuffaron looked down at her and thoughtfully considered her virginal whiteness, the graceful slope of her wings, the pink of her tiny toes showing from beneath her radiant gown. "Georgie, I would not try to trifle with such proof if I were you. Besides, you have nothing to wager."

"I am not allowed to wager."

"See?" said Tuffaron. "You are afraid to prove your own point for you know quite well you cannot."

"I'll wager my magic ring against your magic snuffbox that I can prove you wrong," said Georgie.

"Ah," said Tuffaron. "But how do you propose to prove this?"

"The outer limit of my power is to grant anything for forty-eight hours."

"Certainly, but according to the law, if you grant anything for forty-eight hours you have to have it back in forty-eight hours."

"Just so. A human being," declared Georgie, "is so starved for comfort and happiness that if he is granted all for just a short time he will be content."

"My dear, you do not know humans."

"Is it a wager?"

"A sure thing is never a wager," said Tuffaron, "but I will place my magic snuffbox against your magic ring that if you give all for forty-eight hours you will only succeed in creating misery. My precept is well known."

"The wager is stated. I shall grant all for forty-eight hours and even though I must take it back at the end of the time I shall succeed in leaving happiness."

Solemnly he wrapped his huge black hand about her dainty little white one. She eyed him defiantly as they sealed the bargain. And then she leaped up and flew swiftly away.

Tuffaron barked a guffaw. "I have always wanted an angel ring," he told the hot day.

It was not warm in the room and one might have kept butter on the ancient radiator. A trickle of bitter wind came in under the door, gulped what warmth there was to be found in the place and then with a triumphant swoop went soaring up and out through the cracked pane at the window's top.

It was not warm but it was clean, this room. Patient hands had polished the floor with much scrubbing, the walls of the room bore erasure marks but no spots of smudge. The tiny kitchenette might not have a quarter in its gas meter but it had bright red paper edging its shelves and the scanty utensils were burnished into mirrors; the tea towels, though ragged, were newly washed and even the dish cloth was white—but this last was more because there had been nothing with which to soil dishes for many days. A half loaf of bread and a chunk of very cheap cheese stood in solitary bravery upon the cupboard shelf.

The little, worn lady who napped upon the bed, was not unlike the shawl which covered her—a lovely weave but tattered edges and thin warp and a bleach which comes with time.

Meredith Smith's little hand, outflung against the pillow, matched the whiteness of the case save where the veins showed blue. It was a hand which reminded one of a doll's.

She slept. To her, as years went on, sleep was more and more the only thing left for her to do. It was as though an exhausting life had robbed her of rest so that now when she no longer had work to do she could at least make up lost sleep.

From the age of eighteen to the age of sixty she had been a stenographer in the Hayward Life Co. She had written billions of words in letters for them. She had kept the files of her department in neat and exact order. She would have had a pension now but Hayward Life was a defunct organization and had been so for the past six years.

Relief brought Meredith Smith enough for her rent and a small allowance of food but she was not officious and demanding enough to extract from the authorities a sufficiency.

But she did not mind poverty. She did not mind cold. There was only one sharp pain with her now and one which she felt was a pain which should be accepted, endured. It had come about three years ago when she had chanced to read a poem in which old age was paid by its memory of love and it had swept over her like a blinding flood that she, Meredith Smith, had no payment for that age. The only thing she had saved was a decent burial, two hundred and twenty dollars beneath the rug.

She had worked. There had been many women who had married out of work. But she had worked. She had been neither beautiful nor ugly. She had merely been efficient. At times she had thought to herself that on some future day she must find, at last, that thing for which her heart was starved. But it had always been a future day and now, at sixty-six, there would never be one.

She had never loved a man. She had never been loved by a child. She had had a long succession of efficient days where her typewriter had clattered busily and loudly as though to muffle her lack.

She had never had anyone. She had been a small soul in a great city, scarcely knowing who worked at the next desk. And so it had been from eighteen to sixty. And now—

It was easier now to sleep and try not to think of it. For she would die without having once known affection, jealousy, ecstacy or true pain.

She had been useless. She had run a typewriter. She had been nothing to life. She had never known beauty; she had never known laughter; she had never known pain; and she would die without ever having lived, she would die without a single tear to fall upon her going. She had never been known, to be forgotten. Yesterdays reached back in a long gray chain like pages written with a single word and without punctuation. Tomorrow stretched out gray; gray and then black. A long, long time black. And she was forgotten before she was gone and she had nothing to forget except emptiness.

But the hand which touched her hand so warmly did not startle her and it did not seem strange for her faded blue eyes to open upon a lovely girl. The door had been locked but Meredith Smith did not think of that for this visitor was sitting upon the edge of the bed and smiling at her so calmly and pleasantly that one could never think of her as an intruder.

"You are Meredith Smith?" said the visitor.

The old lady smiled. "What is your name?"

"I am called Georgette, Meredith. Do not be afraid."

"I am glad you came."

"Thank you. You see very few people, I think."

"No one," said Meredith, "except the relief agent each week."

"Meredith Smith, would you like to see people?"

"I don't understand you."

"Meredith Smith, would you like to see people and be young again and dance and laugh and be in love?"

The old lady's eyes became moist. She smiled, afraid to be eager.

"Would you like to do these things, Meredith Smith, if only for forty-eight hours, knowing that you would again come here and be old?"

"For forty-eight hours—to be young, to dance, to laugh, to be in love—even if only for forty-eight hours." She was still afraid and spoke very quietly.

"Then," said Georgie, "I tell you now," and she had a small stick with a glowing thing upon its end, "that for forty-eight hours, beginning this minute, you can have everything for which you ask and everything done which you want done. But you must know that at the end of the forty-eight hours, everything for which you ask will be taken back."

"Yes," said Meredith in a whisper. "Oh, yes!"

"It is now eight o'clock in the morning," said Georgie. "At eight a. m. day after tomorrow, all things I gave you will have to be returned, save only memory. But until then, Meredith Smith, all things you want are yours."

It did not particularly surprise Meredith that her visitor did not go away as a normal person should but dissolved, glowed and vanished. Meredith sat looking at the imprint on the bed where Georgette had been seated. And then Meredith rose.

YOUTH! BEAUTY!

In her mirror she watched and her fluttering heart began to grow stronger and stronger. Her hair turned from gray to soft, burnished chestnut. Her eyes grew larger and longer and brightened into a blue which was deep and lovely and warm. Her skin became fresh and pink and radiant. She smiled at herself and her beautiful mouth bowed open to reveal sparkling, even teeth. There came a taut, breath-catching curve in her throat and the unseen hand which molded her flowed over her form, rounding it, giving it grace, giving it allure and poise—

YOUTH!

A gay darling of eighteen stared with lip-parted wonder at herself.

BEAUTY!

Ah, beauty!

She was not able to longer retain the somber rags of her clothes and with a prodigal hand ripped them away and, naked, held out her arms and waltzed airily about the room, thrilled to the edge of tears but laughing instead.

"Meredith, Meredith," she said to the mirror, posed as she halted. "Meredith, Meredith," she said again, intrigued by the warm charm of the new voice which came softly and throbbingly out of herself.

Ah, yes, a young beauty. A proud young beauty who could yet be tender and yielding, whose laughter was gay and told of passion and love—

"Meredith, Meredith," she whispered and kissed herself in the mirror.

Where were those dead years? Gone and done. Where were those lightless days? Cut through now by the brilliance of this vision she beheld. Where was the heartache of never having belonged or suffered? Gone, gone. All gone now. For everything might be taken back but this memory and the memory, that would be enough! Forty-eight hours. And already those hours were speeding.

What to wear? She did not even know enough of current styles to ask properly. And then she solved it with a giggle at her own brightness.

"I wish for a morning outfit of the most enhancing and modern style possible."

CLOTHES!

They rustled upon the furniture and lay still, new in expensive boxes. A saucy little hat. Sheer stockings so thrilling to the touch. A white linen dress with a piquant collar and a small bolero to match. Long white gloves smooth to the cheek. And underthings. And graceful shoes.

She dressed, lingering ecstatically over the process, enjoying the touch of the fabrics, reveling in the new clean smell of silk and leather.

She enjoyed herself in the glass, turning and turning back, posing and turning again. And then she drew on the gloves, picked up the purse and stepped out of her room.

She was not seen in the hall or on the stairs. She wrinkled a pert little nose at the sordid street.

"A car," she said. "A wonderful car, very long and smooth to ride in, and a haughty chauffeur and footman to drive it."

"Your car, mademoiselle," said the stiffly standing footman, six feet tall and his chin resting on a cloud.

For a moment she was awed by his austerity and she nearly drew back as though he could look through her and know that it was a masquerade. But she did not want him to see how daunted she was and so she stepped into the limousine. Still frightened she settled back upon the white leather upholstery.

"The . . . ah, the park—James."

"Very good, mademoiselle." And the footman stepped into the front seat and said to the chauffeur, "Mademoiselle requires to ride in the park."

THEY HUMMED away and up the street and through the town and soon they were spinning between the green acres of Central Park, one of a flowing line of traffic. She was aware of people who stopped and glanced toward her for it was a lovely car and in it she knew they saw a lovely girl. She felt suddenly unhappy and conspicuous. And it worried her that the chauffeur and footman knew that this was a masquerade.

"Stop," she said into the phone.

The car drew up beside a curbed walk and she got out.

"I shall not need you again," she said.

"Very good, mademoiselle," said the footman with a stiff bow, and the car went away.

She was relieved about it for not once in it had she felt comfortable. And standing here she did not feel conspicuous at all for people passed her by, now that the car was gone, with only that sidelong glance which is awarded every heart-stirring girl by the passer-by.

Warm again and happy, she stepped off the walk and risked staining her tiny shoes in the grass. She felt she must walk in soft earth beneath a clear sky and feel clean wind, and so, for nearly an hour, she enjoyed herself.

Then she began to be aware of time slipping away from her. She knew she must compose herself, bring order to her activities, plan out each hour which remained to her. For only in that way could she stock a store of memories from which she could draw upon in the years which would remain to her.

Across the drive was a bench beside the lake and she knew that it would be a nice place to think and so she waited for the flow of traffic to abate so that she could cross to it.

She thought the way clear and stepped upon the street. There was a sudden scream of brakes and a thudding bump as wheels were stabbed into the gutter. She stood paralyzed with terror to see that a large car had narrowly missed her and that only by expert driving on the part of its chauffeur.

A young man was out of the back and had her hand, dragging her from the street and into the car with him. She sat still, pale and weak, lips parted. But it was not from fright but from wonder. She had not wished for this and yet it could not have been better had she wished for it.

"You are not hurt?" he said. He was shy and nervous and when he saw that he still held her hand he quickly dropped it and moistened his lips.

She looked long at him. He was a young man, probably not more than twenty-five, for his skin was fresh and his eyes were clear. He radiated strength and this shyness of his was only born from fright at the near accident, fright for her and awe for her beauty as well. He was six feet tall and his eyes were black as his hair. His voice was low and showed breeding.

"Is there . . . there any place we can take you?"

"I . . . wasn't going anywhere in particular," she said. "You are very good. I . . . I am sorry I frightened you so. I wasn't watching—"

"It is all our fault," said the young man. "Please, may I introduce myself? I am Thomas Crandall."

"I am Meredith Smith."

"It . . . it isn't quite proper—to be introduced this way," he faltered. And then he smiled good-humoredly at her and they both began to laugh.

The laughter put them at ease and took away the memory of the near fatality.

THEY DROVE for a little while, more and more in tune with each other and then he turned to her and asked, "Would I seem terribly bold if I asked you to have lunch with me? I at least owe you that."

"I would be very disappointed if you did not," she answered. "That . . . that isn't a very ladylike speech I know but . . . but I would like to have lunch with you."

He was flattered and enthralled and smiled it upon her. Most of his lingering shyness departed and he leaned toward the glass to tell his chauffeur, "The Montmaron, please."

"You know," he said a little while later as they sat in the roof garden at a small table, "I was hoping that something like this might happen. Last night, I was hoping. Do you believe in wishes? I think wishes come true sometimes, don't they?"

She was startled that he might have read her secret but she smiled at him and realized it wasn't so. The softness of the string music failed, after that, to wholly dispel a fear which had been implanted in her heart.

What would he think when he discovered— No, she mustn't dwell upon that. She would not dwell on the end.

He was so nice when he laughed. He was so nice.

And yet the knife of fear still probed her heart. He must not know. They would live up to the moment and then—then she—

"It's wine with bubbles in it," he was saying. "Wine with giggles in it. Drink a little but not too much."

She drank. She felt better. She almost forgot—

They went to a matinee but she had so little attention for the stage that the play, afterward, seemed quite incoherent to her. Somehow Thomas Crandall was the

leading man and Thomas Crandall occasionally smiled sideways at her. When it ended he was holding her hand. He seemed very doubtful of his small advances and she had the feeling that he was afraid he might touch her and break her.

"What will your family think?" he said when they were outside. "You've been gone all afternoon and someone must have expected you somewhere. Surely anyone as beautiful as you must be missed."

She felt nervous and guilty. "Oh . . . oh I . . . I am not from New York. I am from Boston. That's it. From Boston. And—my father and mother are both dead. I came down to see a show."

"Ah, so I've helped you attend to business." He grinned. "Then I am very much in luck. Then you can dine with me. And there are clubs and dancing and there will be a moon tonight—" Instantly he blushed. And she laughed at him.

"I am fond of the moon," she said, close against his arm. "Oh, but I must . . . must go to my hotel for a little while and dress."

"Tell Charles which one. No, tell me and I'll tell him. I should dress also."

"The . . . the Astor."

"I'll be back in an hour," he called to her from the curb. And the big car drew away.

She was filled with uneasiness to be standing there alone. She knew very little about such things and was certain she would make some mistake. But she reckoned without her beauty and the gallantry of man.

"I wish," she whispered to herself as she signed the register, "that I had a hundred dollars in my purse." And to the smiling clerk, "A suite, please. A large suite. My . . . my baggage will be brought in."

And the porter came through the door carrying new luggage with her name upon it.

When Thomas Crandall came back an hour later he stopped in wide-eyed reverence for the girl who came from the elevator. Her glowing chestnut hair swept down to naked shoulders and her gown, a graceful miracle in green, flowed closely to her to sweep out and to the floor. Finding it difficult to speak—for there seemed to be something in his throat—he helped her into the ermine wrap and led her through the lobby and down the steps as though he was escorting the sun itself.

"You . . . you are beautiful," he said. "No, that's not adequate. You are— Oh," he gave it up, "where would you like to dine?"

"Where you are going," she said.

He laughed. They both laughed. And they went away to dine.

The world became a fantasy of bright glasses and swirling color and music, a delicate sensory world and people laughed together and waiters were quick and kind.

"Not too much," he admonished her. "It's not the wine. It's the bubbles. They have fantasies in them. Each one contains a giggle or a castle or the moon."

They danced. And the bubbles won.

Somewhat astonished she looked about her to find the last place nearly empty. A scrubwoman was already at work upon the floor and a man was piling tables and chairs. And the orchestra, when Tommy offered more largess, was too sleepy to play. There was no more champagne. There was no more music. And the edge of the roof garden was already gray and the moon had gone.

She yawned as he took her arm. She nearly fell asleep as they got into his car. She snuggled down against him and looked up at him.

He laughed at her and then grew serious. "If I thought . . . if . . . well . . . I wish I could marry you."

"Why can't you?" she said.

"Why can't— Do you mean it? But, no. You've known me a very short time. You—"

"I have known you forever. We are to be married!"

"But what if . . . if I turn out to be a drunkard?"

"Then I will also be a drunkard."

He looked at her for a moment. "You do love me, don't you, as I love you?"

She pulled his head down and kissed him.

Somewhat dazedly afterward he said to his chauffeur: "There must be a place where people can get married quickly."

"Quickly," she murmured.

"Yes, sir," said the chauffeur.

"Take us there," said Tommy.

Suddenly she was terrified. She did not dare permit him to do this. For in—in twenty-six hours she would be— But she was more afraid that he would not.

She snuggled against him once more and sighed. Twenty-six hours left. Only twenty-six hours left but they could be full and she could be happy. And somehow, she would have to have the courage to face what came after. To face the loss of him— She drowsed.

With sixteen hours left to her she lay upon the great bed in the airy room and looked at the ceiling beams where the afternoon sunlight sent reflections dancing. He had said that he had a few phone calls to make and that there would be a party beginning at six and that the whole city—or whoever was important in the city—would be there. And she had understood suddenly that she knew about Thomas Crandall or had heard of him as a playwright, fabulously successful.

This, his home, was a palace of wonder to her, all marble and teak and ivory, filled with servants who were soft-footed and efficient—servants of whom she was secretly in awe.

She had not wished this and yet it had happened. It had been all Tommy's idea to marry her, to bring her here, to give a great party—

She did not have the courage it would take to run away now, before everyone came. For these hours were so precious that she hated to waste minutes in thinking so darkly on things. But think now she must. In six-

teen hours she would be sixty-six years old, faded, delicate, starved— And Thomas Crandall—

She began to weep and, in a little while, realized that there was no solution. For what could she ask which she could retain? She could not plead that his love would not change. She knew that when he knew, he would be revolted both by her withered self and by the witchcraft which he would perceive. She could never stand to see him look at her as he would. And she could never bear to so cruelly abuse his love. For his love was not part of the wishes. If only it had been! Then he would forget—

And another knife of thought cut into her. Could she go back now, Mrs. Thomas Crandall, to a hovel on a sordid street and be happy with memory? She began to know that that could never be.

But his footstep was in the hall and he burst in followed by a train of servants who bore great boxes of clothes and flowers and little boxes full of things much more precious.

She was lost in the rapture of it. And then when she kissed him she forgot even the little boxes of velvet.

"Tommy, if this could last forever and ever—"

"It will last. Forever and ever." But he seemed to sense something strange in her and the dark eyes were thoughtful for just the space of a heartbeat. And her heart was racing.

"Tommy—don't leave me. Ever!"

"Never. In a little while the mayor and I don't know who all will be here for the wedding dinner. After your very slight wedding breakfast, I should think you would want something to eat. We'll have pheasants and . . . and humming bird tongues—"

He scooped her up and carried her around the room and pretended to throw her out of the window.

And so the hours fled, as vanishes a song.

And it was four o'clock in the morning with the summer day heralded by a false dawn. Beside her Tommy slept quietly, hair tousled, one arm flung across her. A bird began to chirp himself into groggy wakefulness and somewhere in the direction of the river a boat whistled throatily. A clock was running in the room. Running loudly. She could just see its glowing face and knew that it was four. She had just four hours left. Four hours.

And she could not trust herself. She had to run away. But she could not trust herself not to afterward come back. And everything she had been given would be taken away except the memory.

The memory!

She knew now that a memory was not enough. A memory would be pain she could not bear. She would read of his plays. And hear of his continued fame. And she—she would not be able to come near him—and she would not be able to stay away. She would come back and he would not believe her. He would turn her forth and she would see a look upon his face—

She shivered.

She knew suddenly what she had to do and so she shivered.

With gentle slowness, she removed his arm and crept from the bed. He stirred and seemed about to wake and then quieted. She bent and kissed his cheek and a small bright tear glowed there in the cold false dawn. He stirred again and muttered her name in his sleep. A frown passed over his brow and then again he was still.

She drew her robe about her and tiptoed out into the anteroom where she quickly dressed. She commanded pen and ink:

My Darling:

This has all been a dream and I am grateful. You must not think of me again for I am not worth the thought. I knew I could not be with you past this dawn and yet I allowed your love for me to grow. Darling, try to forgive me. I go into nothingness. Do not think of me as unfaithful for I shall be faithful. But I was given forty-eight hours of freedom and now— By the time you read this I shall be dead. Do not search for me. It cannot be otherwise. I am grateful to you. I love you.

Meredith.

At six, Tommy Crandall woke with a terrified start. He did not know what had happened but he seemed to hear a far-off voice cry to him. Meredith was gone. He flung back the covers and leaped up to search madly for her. A valet looked strangely at him.

"Mrs. Crandall left here two hours ago, sir. She went in a taxi. She said she had left you a note— Here it is, sir."

Tommy read the note and then, trembling, read it through again. He walked in a small circle in the middle of the room and then suddenly understood. Wildly he snatched at his clothes and got them on.

"Get the car!" he roared at the valet. "Oh, my God, get the car! I'll find her. I have to find her!"

He did not bother to go to the Astor for there was an urgency in the note which directed his steps immediately to the police.

And he found a sleepy sergeant at the morgue who yawned as he said, "You can look but we ain't got nothing like that in here. Two firemen that burned up on a ship and a couple of accident cases come in about dawn. But we ain't got no beautiful woman. No, sir, it ain't very often you see a beautiful woman down here. When they're beautiful they don't let themselves—"

Tommy flung away and then turned. "How do I find a medical examiner?"

"That's a thought," yawned the sergeant. "Call headquarters and they'll give you the duty desk."

It was eight o'clock before Tommy found the medical examiner who knew. The man was still perturbed and perplexed for he was not at ease about things. He was a small, nervous politician's heel dog.

He ran a finger under his collar as he gazed at the overwrought young man who stood in the doorway. "Well, I thought it was irregular. But it was my duty and there was no sign of foul play. And so I took the death certificate and signed it—"

Tommy turned pale. "Then . . . then she is dead."

"Why, yes. A funny thing," said the coroner uncomfortably. "But she came and got me and said to come along and, of course, a beautiful woman that way and looking rich, I went along. And we came to this undertaking parlor and went in and she said she had two hundred and twenty dollars of her own money. She was very particular about its being her own money and she—"

"Are you sure she is dead?"

"Why, yes, I say, she made the arrangements on the condition that she would be buried right away without a notice sent out or anything and paid spot cash and then—well, she dropped dead."

"How do you know?"

"Brother, when they're dead, they're dead. My stethoscope doesn't lie. And no sign of foul play or poison whatever. And, well, I took my pen in hand and signed. She didn't want an autopsy because she said she couldn't stand being cut up, and she didn't want to be embalmed. So they just took her and buried—"

"What funeral parlor?" demanded Tommy savagely.

"I'll give you the address," said the examiner. And he did.

THE professional manner of the undertaker Tommy dashed aside. "A lady by the name of Meredith Smith Crandall was here this morning."

"Why, yes," said the sad gentleman. "Yes, that is true." He looked upset. "Is there anything wrong?"

"No. Nothing wrong—no trouble for you, I mean. What happened?"

"Why she came in and paid for a funeral on the condition that she would be buried right away and so we buried her, of course. She paid cash, double price on our cheapest funeral. She insisted it was her own money. I don't know why. The thing is very regular. We have a certificate—"

"Take me to the cemetery!" cried Tommy in anguish.

"Certainly," said the undertaker respectfully. "But she has been legally buried and an exhumation order—"

"Take me there!"

They drove between the gateposts of Woodpine and it was twenty minutes of ten. The undertaker pointed to the grave where the turf was still raw. A workman was starting to clear away to place sod on the place and another was hauling away spare dirt.

The undertaker looked at Tommy with amazement. The workmen stared. Tommy immediately seized a spade and began to throw back the earth. When they attempted to stop him he struck at them with the implement and kept on digging. And then, because his very savageness had cowed them, they helped him lift the cheap, sealed coffin from the earth. Tommy knocked off the lid with the spade.

A little old lady lay there, clad in decent if ragged garments, her fine gray hair a halo above the delicate oval of her face. But she was not lying with crossed arms. And she had not died with a smile. She had been so tiny that she had been able to turn over in her coffin and now she lay, with a bruised and bloodied face and torn hands, huddled on her side and her expression did not indicate that she had died in peace.

It was ten o'clock.

The workmen suddenly drew away from Tommy. The undertaker gasped and involuntarily crossed himself. For the man who clutched the body to him and wept was no longer young. He was an old man of more than sixty now where he had been young before and the good garments he had worn had become carefully kept but threadbare tweed. What hair he had now was gray. And the tears which coursed down his cheeks made their way through furrows put there by loneliness and privation.

You see, Georgie had made two calls the day before.

THE END.

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

ON A LIMB

By Anthony Boucher

● A well-known detective story author searches the famous quatrains of Nostradamus, the prophet, for clues to the future—and goes out "on a limb" with specific guesses as to what Nostradamus meant in his prophecies of our immediate future, and this war.

Illustrated by Kramer

The war will continue relentlessly. Attempts at a negotiated peace will be frustrated by Hitler's excessive demands. While France is hopelessly dominated, resentment against Hitler will increase in the United States as the arms program advances. George VI, after the collapse of his prime minister, will flee to Canada. The Rome-Berlin axis will cease to exist even in name and Italy become the merest vassal. De Gaulle will rally forces stationed in the East and lead an attack upon France through Italy, which will cause Germany to drop even the pretense of French independence. Despite the king's flight, the British Isles will resist invasion and finally establish a completely successful blockade of continental Europe. With the aid of the United States, Great Britain will launch a naval attack from the Western Hemisphere on Europe, securing its first toehold near Bordeaux and advancing on Paris. Hitler will be defeated, and the peace terms will take the form of a sort of Union Now under American domination. Great Britain will no longer rule the waves nor hold the balance of power. The United States will take over both these functions, and with them establish a long reign of peace on earth.

At this point the reader will pause and remark, "Sure. Interesting. Plausible-enough guesses, most of them. But what's it doing in Unknown Worlds? If this goes on, we'll have Dorothy Thompson for Jane Rice and George Fielding Eliot replacing de Camp.

But Unknown Worlds is exactly where these conjectures belong, because, you see, these prophecies, even down to the names of Hitler and de Gaulle, were written four centuries ago.

You've guessed it. It's Nostradamus again. Whenever the world is in a worse than usual mess, people turn to the prophetic quatrains of this incredible sixteenth century French physician. But the last serious and extensive analysis of Nostradamus' work in English was written in 1891, and it's time to re-examine the quatrains and see how much of the current situation he has described and what can be gathered from him concerning the immediate future.

Most Unknown Worlds readers are probably already acquainted with Michel de Nostredame, called Nostradamus, through Henry James Forman's excellent "The Story of Prophecy"—reviewed in Unknown for December, 1939—through current popularizing articles, usually both sensational and inaccurate, or through the film short subjects which have featured his work.

To identify him in all brevity, Nostradamus was born in St. Rémy in 1503 and died at Salon in 1566. In 1529 he received the degree of Doctor of Medicine at Montpellier, and practiced with distinction, particularly in combating the prevalent plagues. In 1555 he published the first seven centuries—groups of one hundred—of his prophecies. The Valois court, interested in the occult sciences, took him up as a favorite. In 1558 he added three centuries to his collection. In 1559 one of his prophecies was so startlingly fulfilled that his fame became all but limitless. After his death, other prophecies, apparently authentic, were published by a Boswellian friend.

To convince you of his accuracy in the past, before we approach the present, here are three samples:

I, 35*

Le lyon jeune le vieux surmontera
En champ bellique par singulier duelle:
Dans cage d'or les yeux lui crevera,
Deux classes une, puis mourir, mort cruelle.

The young lion shall conquer the old
On the warlike field in single combat:
In a golden cage he shall pierce his eyes,
Two classes one, then die a cruel death.

The last line is obscure†. But the remainder is incredibly detailed and accurate. On July 10, 1559, four years after the publication of the quatrain, one Captain Coryes, later the Earl of Montgomery, overthrew Henri II of France in a tourney, splintering his lance

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* The text of these quatrains is taken from Charles A. Ward, "Oracles of Nostradamus," 1891; reprinted with a supplement by Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940. The only liberties taken with the text are the correction of an occasional wrong accent and the adaptation to conformity with modern usage of u, v, i, and j. The translations and interpretations are my own.

† *Classe*, in Nostradamus, usually means *fleet* or *army* (Latin *classis*), but that meaning seems hard to fit in here.

against the king's armor and piercing the king's eye through the bars of his golden helmet. The king died a cruel death in agony. Both men bore on their shields the device of a lion.

It is all there. The scene of combat, the devices and relative ages of the men, and above all, the singular detail of the piercing of the eye through the golden cage of the royal visor. Sure, I know, if you put a hundred monkeys at a hundred typewriters— But this is by no means all. Go on.

IX, 18
Le lys Dauffois portera dans Nanci
Jusques en Flandres electeur de l'Empire;
Neufve obturée au grand Montmorency,
Hors lieux prouvé delivré a clere peyne.
He will bear the lily of the Dauphin into Nancy,
As far as Flanders (for) the elector of the Empire;
A new imprisonment for the great Montmorency,
Outside of the approved place delivered to notable punishment.

The first two lines describe accurately enough some military movements of Louis XIII in 1633 and 1635. But what interests us is the last two. On October 30, 1632, Montmorency was executed for rebellion. He had been imprisoned in the newly built Hôtel de Ville at Toulouse. As a concession to his family, he was executed in an inclosed courtyard rather than at an approved public place of execution.

That alone would be neat and impressive. But here is the payoff: As a further concession, he was executed, not by the public headsman, but by a private soldier. The phrase, *notable punishment,* is in French *clere peyne.* And the name of this soldier, to whom Montmorency was delivered, was Clerepeyne.

IV, 54
Du nom qui onque ne fut un Roi Gaulois
Jamais ne fut un foudre si craintif.
Tremblant l'Italie, l'Espagne at les Anglois
De femme estrangiers grandement attentif.

Of a name which never was (that of) a French king,
Never was there so fearful a thunderbolt.
Italy, Spain, and the English tremble.
He will be greatly attentive to foreign women.

The detailed application of this quatrain to Napoleon is too obvious to need any notes.

Among other events precisely predicted by Nostradamus may be mentioned the execution of Charles I by order of Parliament, the invention of gunpowder, the exact date (1666) of the great fire of London, the rise of the *tiers état*, and the flight and capture of Louis XVI, even down to the names of two of the men who betrayed him and a reference to the Tuileries, not even built at the time the quatrain was written.

It should be obvious from these excerpts that Nostradamus is worthy of serious consideration. But before we go on to his prophecies of the present, two questions arise. How did he obtain these astounding results, and why has no one been able to take advantage of them to avert the future?

The first question is impossible to answer. One quatrain (I, 1) suggests that Nostradamus may have employed the methods of the oracle of Apollo Didymeus at Branchidae, an oracle almost comparable to Delphi in ancient reputation. Yet he claimed to be a loyal member of the Catholic church, which would seem to preclude any use of black magic or paganism, and no accusation of heresy was ever brought against him. Simply by elimination, for there is no evidence to support the suggestion, time travel appears to be the only method by which a good Catholic could achieve non-religious prophecy.

The second question, if carefully considered, answers itself. The essence of true prophecy is that it must be disbelieved or misinterpreted. If it can be circumvented, it will be false. Cassandra, whom Apollo blessed with prophecy and cursed with an incredulous public, is the perfect archetype of the prophet. Nostradamus realized this. He had first written his prophecies, we gather, clearly and in sequence. Then, foreseeing the impossible contradiction of this procedure, he cast them into cryptic quatrains, in the damnedest French you ever read, and shuffled them out of all time order. As a result, they can usually be interpreted only *after the event*. Attempts at reading the future result in such catastrophes as Bouys' confident proof to Napoleon that Nostradamus promised him victory forever, including a satisfactory invasion of England.

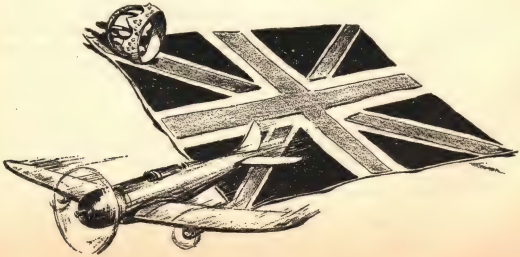
That's why the title of this article. I'm trying the impossible, the interpretation of prophecy *before the event*. It's a long and shaky limb that I'm climbing out on. But file this copy of Unknown Worlds away carefully. It may make good reading in another year or two.

A WORD before we take up the predictions of the present, on the difficulties of translating Nostradamus. His language is something like a Chinese version of James Joyce—Chinese, in that the words are frequently strung along together without prepositions, verbs, or even grammatical agreement, and Joycean, in that he is apt to form words at his own pleasure from roots in the classical or in other modern languages. He is also, like most cryptic prophets, fond of puns and anagrams.

As a result, an absolutely unbiased translation is impossible. You have to know what you think the original means before you can start putting it into intelligible English. I have tried to make these translations as direct and honest as possible, and to indicate whenever I am interpolating or interpreting; but if you read French, by all means keep an eye on the original and make sure that I am not, with the best intentions in the world, slipping over a fast one.

First let's take a few lines at random:

III, 7
Les fugitifs, feu du ciel sus les picques—
Refugees, fire from heaven on the weapons—
III, 11
Les armes batre au ciel longue saison—
Weapons battling a long time in the sky—



VI, 34

De feu volant la machination—

The machination* of flying fire—

III, 13

—*Quand submergee la classe nagera.*

—When the fleet will swim submerged.

These are pretty enough, in a Vernesian way, as a prediction of modern warfare. But such predictions have been made often enough, and without any claims to supernatural prophetic powers; and the rest of these four quatrains is not readily explicable. I quote them only because Nostradamus has often been praised for foreseeing the airplane and the submarine, and because of the possible pun in *fire from heaven* and *flying fire.* These poetical phrases could so easily mean *lightning,* or in German, *Blitz.* In other words,

The machination of flying fire—
might well mean

The machinery of Blitz—

But for more specific details of contemporary history:

VII, 22

Par fraude regne, forces expolier,
La classe obsesse, passages à l'espie.
Deux faincts amis se viendront rallier,
Esveillier hayne de long temps assoupie.

To despoil the realm, the armies by deceit,
The fleet besieged, movements by spies.
Two pretended friends will come to join together,
To awaken a long-sleeping hatred.

The first two lines give a succinct description of the Hitlerian approach to conquest; no other world conqueror has been as marked by the systematic use of deceit. The identity of the *two pretended friends* is not hard to guess. The last line might refer either to anti-Semitism or to nationalism.

V, 30

Tout à l'entour de la grande cité
Seront soldats logés par champs et ville:
Donner l'assaut Paris Rome incité,
Sur le pont lors sera faicte grand pille.

All around the great city
Soldiers will be lodged in country and town:
(He will) make an attack on Paris, Rome (will be) incited (by this),
Then a great deceit will be practiced at the bridge.

The great city, in Nostradamus, is generally Paris, now surrounded by German troops. I confess to a little wishful translation in the third line, which reads literally

To give the attack—Paris—Rome—incited.

The words have to be put together somehow; and the successful attack on France was the signal for Italy's entrance into the war. As to the last line, you will recall that one of the chief reasons for the ease of Germany's entry into France was the treasonable neglect of certain officers to blow up bridges in retreat.

* In the obsolete sense of *machinery.*

I, 20

Tour, Orleans, Blois, Anger, Reims & Nantes,
Cités vexees par subit changement,
Par langues estranges seront tenduës tentes,
Fleuves, dards, Renes terre & mer tremblement.

Tour, Orléans, Blois, Anger, Reims and Nantes,
Cities troubled by a sudden change,
Tents will be set up by foreign tongues,
Rivers, darts, Rennes, earth and sea a-trembling.

I give the last line literally because, frankly, I have no idea what it means. If you can figure it out, fine. As a pun, *fleuve, dards, Renes* could be *fleuves d'arène,* or *rivers of the arena, i. e.,* of blood. Or Rennes may be the ancient city in Bretany—in which case, watch out for that earthquake.

Unintelligible though the last line may be, the first three are all too clear. A foreign army will set up its dominion in France and take over six specified cities. These six are not all bunched together, so that one could easily prophesy the same fate for all. They are widely scattered, but *every one of them is within the border of occupied France.*

V, 94

Translatera en la grand Germanie,
Brabant & Flandres, Gand, Bruges, & Bolongne:
La trefve fainte le grand duc d'Armenie,
Assaillira Vienne & la Cologne.

He will take over into great Germany
Brabant and Flanders, Ghent, Bruges and Boulogne:
(After) a false armistice, the grand duke of Armenia
Will attack Vienna and Cologne.

Again the latter part is mysterious, and apparently as yet unfulfilled.* And again the first part is uncannily exact. The first four places mentioned are in Belgium, and Boulogne is one of the vital channel ports. We have then a total, in this and the preceding quatrain, of eleven cities and districts mentioned as falling under German domination, and eleven right out of eleven. The average isn't bad.

III, 63

Romain pouvoir sera du tout à bas:
Son grand voisin imiter les vestiges:
Occultes haines civiles & debats,
Retarderont aux bouffons leur folies.

Roman power will decline entirely:
(He will) imitate the footsteps of his great neighbor:
Hidden civil hatreds and dissensions
Will hold back the follies of the clowns.

This has all worked itself out. Roman power has become nothing, partly because of Mussolini's feckless imitation of Hitler, partly—see, for instance, John Whitaker's recent dispatches—because of internal dissension which hampers the effective operation of the machine. The last line even foreshadows the role which Italy now plays as the comedy relief of the war.

* Warning for speculators: *Duc* may mean, not *duke,* but *dux,* leader. If you could find a Soviet general born in the Republic of Armenia, you might have a pretty prophecy. Or *Armenie* may be a pun or an anagram.

V, 26
Le gent esclave par un heur Martial,
Viendra en haut degré tant esslevee,
Changeront Prince, naistre un provincial,
Passer la mer copie aux monts levee.
The Slavic people by one martial hour
Will come to be raised in high esteem,
They will change their prince, a provincial to be born,
To cross the sea, a force raised in the mountains.

The quatrain is not entirely clear; but a Slavic people who change their prince* and attain to one hour of glory by military resistance with forces of mountaineers is a perfect brief description of the last hours of Yugoslavia. Provincials crossing the sea may suggest the Australian troops employed in the brief Balkan war; or if you read, by a plausible-enough misprint, *maistre* for *naistre*—*i. e.,* the master (will be) a provincial—it may refer to the appointment as second in command of the Middle East forces of Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey, born in New South Wales, who conducted the brave stand at Thermopylae.

VI, 97
Cinq & quarante degrez ciel bruslera
Feu approcher de la grand cité neuve
Instant grande flamme esparse sautera
Quand on voudra des Normans faire preuve.
(At) forty-five degrees the sky will burn
Fire will approach the great new city
Suddenly a great scattered flame will leap
When they wish to test the Normans.

The Balkan conflict was the first test in a year of the British—Normans, as heirs to the Conqueror—against the German machine. Belgrade—a new city as capital of a new State—is almost exactly on 45° north latitude. No other major city is so close to the line; the only others coming even near are Venice, Turin, Portland (Oregon), and Harbin, none of which could be appositely called new. (There are no cities at 45° south latitude.) The burning sky and leaping flame not only describe the devastation of Belgrade, but again suggest lightning, *Blitz.*

So MUCH for the present. We have seen the Rome-Berlin axis, the invasion of France, the collapse of Italy, and the Balkan war all described, sometimes with astonishing detail. And now we go out on that limb.†

Take one by one the sentences which form the hopefully prophetic first paragraph of this article:

The war will continue relentlessly. Attempts at a negotiated peace will be frustrated by Hitler's excessive demands.

VIII, 2 bis
Plusiers viendront, & parleront de paix,
Entre Monarques & seigneurs bien puissans:
Mais ne sera accordé de si près,
Que ne se rendent plus qu'autres obeissans.
Many will come and talk of peace
Between monarchs and mighty lords:
But it will not be granted at once
Unless they become even more submissive than others.

Notice that this attempt at peace is not between kings nor between nations; but *between monarchs and mighty lords.* With the exception of France and Poland, all the countries so far involved on the British side of this war have been monarchies; while the axis powers, neither republics nor kingdoms, are ruled by mighty lords.

VIII, 4 bis
Beaucoup de gens voudront parlementer
Aux grands seigneurs qui leur feront la guerre.
On ne voudra en rien les escouter,
Helas! si Dieu n'envoye paix en terre.
Many people (or peoples, *i. e.,* nations) will wish to parley
With the great lords who make war on them.
A deaf ear will be turned to their pleas,
Woe! unless God send peace on earth.

This quatrain is a repetition of the preceding one, but with a suggestion of some hope for papal intervention.

While France is hopelessly dominated, resentment against Hitler will increase in the United States as the arms program advances.

V, 29
La liberté ne sera recouvree,
L'occupera noir, fier, vilain, inique,
Quand la matiere du pont sera ouvree,
D'Hister, Venise faschee la republique.
Liberty will not be recovered,
A black, proud, low-born, wicked man will occupy it,
When the material of the bridge will be wrought,
Of Hister, the republic (of) Venice (will be) vexed.

That is the literal translation, which needs, in previous interpretations, the additional note that Ister was the ancient name of the Danube. But now we have fun. I have mentioned that every cryptic prophet is fond of puns and anagrams, and this quatrain is plum-rich in them. The first two lines quite probably refer to France; Nostradamus' view of history was Gallicentric, and a reference without any proper name is usually to be taken as alluding to France. In the fourth line we get the anagrams.

Now a rule of anagrams in Nostradamus' time was this: that it is fair to change one, and only one, letter of the original word in the reshuffling. So that, under this technical rule, *Hister* is a simple and correct anagram of *Hitler. Venise,* without any change at all (for *u* and *v* were interchangeable in sixteenth century typography), becomes *EE.* (abbreviation for *Etats Unis),* the United States.

The third line is perhaps the prettiest. *When the material of the bridge will be wrought*— It seems an irrelevant minor point, scarcely worth mentioning in

* Notice even the title: not *king* or *ruler,* but *prince,* which was Paul's title as regent.

† If the quatrains that follow seem less direct and cogent than those quoted from M. G. M. by *Time* (May 5, 1941, p. 92), remember that the M. G. M. "quatrains" are a careful and wishful pasting together of significant lines from as many as three separate contexts.

prophecy. But *the material of the bridge,* in French, is *la matiere du pont*—that is, in the best tradition of the prophetic pun—like *Clerepeyne* above—*Du Pont material,* or *armaments.*

To sum up these interpretations:

France will not recover her liberty,
But be occupied by a black, proud, low-born, wicked man.
When armaments will be produced,
The republic of the United States will be vexed with Hitler.

George VI, after the collapse of his Prime Minister, will flee to Canada.

IV, 45

Par conflict Roy, regne abbandonnera,
Les plus grand chef faillira au besoing,
Mors profligez peu en reschapera,
Tours destranchés, un en sera tesmoing.

Because of war, the king will abandon his realm,
The greatest leader will fail in need,
The vanquished dead, few will escape,
The towers chopped down, one will be a witness thereof.

The first two lines need no comment, save to say that the removal of the king from the British Isles is substantiated by another quatrain further on. The last two might seem to refer to a successful invasion, but other quatrains to be cited make that unlikely; they may denote a revolution accompanying the fall of the government.

The Rome-Berlin axis will cease to exist even in name, and Italy become the merest vassal. This is implied in III, 63, quoted above, and still further in:

V, 23

Les deux contens seront unis ensemble.
Quand la pluspart à Mars seront conjoint:
Le grand d'Affrique en effrayeur et tremble,
Duumvirat par la classe desjoinct.

The two will be united together contented.
When the greater part will be joined to Mars,
The great man of Africa (will be) in fright and trembling,
The duumvirate severed by the fleet.

Or to interpret freely: The alliance will be satisfactory enough until the greater of the two undertakes war in earnest. Then the man who vaunted himself on his African conquests will collapse in fear, and the fleet (British crippling of Italian power in the Mediterranean?) will finally break the axis.

De Gaulle will rally forces stationed in the East and lead an attack upon France through Italy—

II, 29
L'oriental sortira de son siège,
Passer les monts Appenons voir la Gaule:
Transpercera le ciel, les eaux et neige,
Et un chacun frappera de sa gaule.
The eastern one will leave his post,
Cross the Apennine Mountains to behold France:
He will pierce heaven, water and snow,
And strike everyone with his rod.

To cross the Apennines to behold France implies invasion somewhere near Genoa, crossing the Ligurian Apennines and the province of Liguria, possibly also Piedmont and the Alps (piercing the snow). There may even be another pun here. The Pennine Alps, between Piedmont and France, are marked on French maps as *A. Pennines,* differing only in punctuation from *Apennines.* The third line is an excellent terse description of an invasion of southern France from the air, by sea, and over the Alps.

All right, you say, but where does de Gaulle come in? Well, the word in the last line, translated by *rod,* is *gaule.* And this pun is very much to the front in French consciousness at the moment. You have doubtless heard of students marching with fishing rods and crying *"Vive de—"* then hoisting their rods, so that the patriotic charade reads, *"Vive de Gaulle!"**

—which will cause Germany to drop even the pretense of French independence.

I, 61
La republique miserable infelice
Sera vastee de nouveau magistrat:
Leur grand amas de l'exil malefice
Fera Sueve ravir leur grand contract.
The wretched unhappy republic
Will be devastated by a new magistrate:
Their great horde of the maleficent exile
Will make Swabia break their grand pact.

Swabia, by a simple metonymy, represents Germany. In other words, the harmful invasion of the exile de Gaulle *(maleficent* not necessarily in a bad sense, but in its original meaning of *wreaking injury)* will enrage Germany to the point of breaking the armistice terms and appointing a despotic governor.

Despite the king's flight, the British Isles will resist invasion and finally establish a completely successful blockade of continental Europe.

III, 71
Ceux dans les isles de long temps assiegez,
Prendront vigeur force contre ennemis:
Ceux par dehors morts de faim profligez,
En plus grand faim que jamais seront mis.
Those long besieged in the islands
Will take on vigor and force against (their) enemies:
Those outside, dead of hunger, defeated,
Will be placed in greater hunger than ever.

The application of this quatrain needs no comment. It is supported by the following, somewhat more cryptic:

X, 32
Le grand empire chacun en devoit estre,
Un sur les autres le viendra obtenir:
Mais peu de temps sera son reigne & estre,
Deux ans aux naves se pourra soustenir.
Everyone should belong to the great empire,
One above others will come to get it:
But its reign and being will last a short time,
For two years it will be able to sustain itself by ships.

The first two lines are not clear; but the last two offer a cheering hope of the collapse of the German empire by successful blockade after two years. Query: two years from when? Not from the founding of the Third Reich, or it would already have come to pass. Perhaps from the start of the war, which would fix the collapse for this fall; or perhaps from the beginning of effective blockading, the exact date of which would be hard to determine.

With the aid of the United States, Great Britain will launch a naval attack from the Western Hemisphere on Europe, securing its first toehold near Bordeaux and advancing on Paris.

V, 34
Du plus profond de l'Occident Anglois
Où est le chef de l'isle Britannique,
Entrera classe dans Gyronde, par Blois
Par vin et sel, feux cachez aux barriques.
From the deepest (reaches) of the English west,
Where the chief of the British Isle is,
A fleet will enter Gironde, by Blois,
By wine and salt, fires hidden in barrels.

Gironde is a maritime department whose principal city is Bordeaux. Blois lies on a direct line from Bordeaux to Paris. *Wine and salt* is a figure frequently used by Nostradamus to denote vigor and force. *Fires hidden in barrels* may refer to cask-shaped bombs; or *barriques* (barrels) may stand by metonymy for *barricades* (originally made of barrels), implying fighting in cities. You will notice how this quatrain confirms IV, 45, *The king will abandon his realm.* For the aid of

* Quote from UP dispatch dated Istanbul, June 4: Travelers from Syria estimated today that 2,500 French soldiers accompanied Colonel Philibert Collet when he fled from Syria last month to join the Free French forces of General Charles de Gaulle. Syrian native troops were reported to be strongly in favor of de Gaulle. Ed.

the United States in this venture, see the following quatrains.

Hitler will be defeated and the peace terms will take the form of a sort of Union Now under American domination. Great Britain will no longer rule the waves nor hold the balance of power. The United States will take over both these functions and with them establish a long reign of peace on earth.*

IV, 96

La soeur aisnee de L'Isle Britannique,
Quinze ans devant le frère aura naissance.
Par son promis, moyennant verifique,
Succedera au Regne de Balance.

The elder sister of the British Isle
Will be born fifteen years before her brother.
Intervening by her true promise,
She will succeed to the Rule of Balance.

Obviously the first two lines must mean an elder sister and younger brother *of the family* of the British Isle; an elder sister *of the Isle* itself could hardly come into being in Nostradamus' future. The birth of the United States is generally reckoned as taking place in 1776. Fifteen years later the British Parliament passed the Canada Act of 1791, replacing the former system of soldier-governors with despotic powers by a limited self-government. The British had learned a lesson in their treatment of colonies; this was the first grant of representative institutions by the Imperial Parliament. The existence of Canada as a democracy of freemen dates from this point, fifteen years after the birth of the "elder sister." Further corroboration lies in the grammatical fact that in French the United States are the *Etats Unis d'AMERIQUE* (feminine) and Canada is the *Dominion du CANADA* (masculine).

X, 100

Le grand empire sera par Angleterre,
Le pempotam des ans plus de trois cens:
Grandes copies passer par mer et terre,
Les Lusitains n'en seront pas contens.

The great empire will be for England,
All-powerfulness for more than three hundred years:
Great armies passing over sea and land,
The Portuguese will not be pleased.

The last line has perplexed commentators, though I cannot see why. Surely no nation, which was once itself foremost in trade and colonizing, will be pleased to behold another rise up to rule the seas. The strange word *pempotam* is probably derived from the shocking Greek-Latin hybrid, *pan-potens*, all-powerful. *More than three hundred years* implies *less than four hundred*, and four hundred years from the publication of this quatrain comes to 1958. The time of the pan-potent empire is almost up.

X, 42

Le regne humain d'Anglique geniture,
Fera son regne paix union tenir:
Captive guerre demy de sa closture,
Longtemps la paix leur fera maintenir.

The human reign of English breed
Will make its rule hold peace (and) union:
War (will be) captive (in) half of its inclosure.
It (this rule) will make them keep peace for a long time.

Human reign is possibly in distinction to the divine reign of kings. The difficult third line seems to mean that war will be restricted to half of its former territory—that is, that the perennial Sino-Japanese conflict may continue even after peace is established in Europe. The rest of the quatrain is clear enough; and of all the prophecies in the centuries, there is none that we could more devoutly long to see fulfilled.

IX, 90

Un capitaine de la Grand Germanie
Se viendra rendre par simulé secours
Au Roy des Rays aide de Pannonie,
Que sa revolte fera de sang gran cours.

A captain of great Germany
Will come to surrender himself through pretended aid
To the King of Kings helper of Pannonia,
So that his revolt will cause blood to flow free.

The application of this quatrain to Rudolf Hess is patent enough at first glance, save for the third line. But Pannonia is the name of an old Roman province which embraced much of what was recently Yugoslavia.

THE LOAD is heavy by now. The limb is trembling with my weight and that of all these quatrains. But go back, check over the incredible successes of Nostradamus in the past, consider the application of the centuries to the present, and then watch your newspapers carefully.

When George VI arrives in Canada, remember that his coming was foreseen four hundred years ago.

Editor's Note: The foregoing article on the prophecies of Nostradamus is thoroughly incredible. Nostradamus' prophecies were thoroughly incredible—in the degree of their accuracy. Somehow it seems easier to believe that a man might successfully predict the movements and broad sweeps of the histories of nations than that, one, two, or four centuries before it happens, the individual directly involved can be named. To name properly and precisely the one individual in the world who will do a specified thing a century or four centuries before that man is born! That seems, somehow, beyond the realm of prophecy. That Nostradamus could name a nation that did not—and would not for two more centuries—exist, could name, even, a particular corporation, specifying one of the products of that corporation, seems even more improbable. But—he named a common soldier who executed a named nobleman long before either was born.

Anagrams and puns do exist in Nostradamus; to read from his quatrains the names and exact circumstances seems much as though the interpreter were finding in them things the author had not put there. How could Nostradamus, A. D. 1558, have known of the Du Pont Corporation, of the *Etats Unis*, or that the Canada Act would be passed in 1791, fifteen years after the American Declaration of Independence—and more than two and a quarter centuries after his writing?

At any rate, the article herewith reached this office postmarked May 12, 1941.

THE END.

* As implied in III, 71 and X, 32 above.

SMOKE GHOST

By Fritz Leiber, Jr.

● The ghosts of old were white and misty things of the night. But the ghosts of todays black and grimy, soot-filled cities might be very different things—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

MISS MILLICK wondered just what had happened to Mr. Wran. He kept making the strangest remarks when she took dictation. Just this morning he had quickly turned around and asked, "Have you ever seen a ghost, Miss Millick?" And she had tittered nervously and replied, "When I was a girl there was a thing in white that used to come out of the closet in the attic bedroom when you slept there, and moan. Of course it was just my imagination. I was frightened of lots of things." And he had said, "I don't mean that traditional kind of ghost. I mean a ghost from the world today, with the soot of the factories in its face and the pounding of machinery in its soul. The kind that would haunt coal yards and slip around at night through deserted office buildings like this one. A real ghost. Not something out of books." And she hadn't known what to say.

He'd never been like this before. Of course it might be joking, but it didn't sound that way. Vaguely Miss Millick wondered whether he mightn't be seeking some sort of sympathy from her. Of course, Mr. Wran was married and had a little child, but that didn't prevent her from having daydreams. She had daydreams about most of the men she worked for. The daydreams were

all very similar in pattern and not very exciting, but they helped fill up the emptiness in her mind. And now he was asking her another of those disturbing and jarringly out-of-place questions.

"Have you ever thought what a ghost of our times would look like, Miss Millick? Just picture it. A smoky composite face with the hungry anxiety of the unemployed, the neurotic restlessness of the person without purpose, the jerky tension of the high-pressure metropolitan worker, the sullen resentment of the striker, the callous viciousness of the strike breaker, the aggressive whine of the panhandler, the inhibited terror of the bombed civilian, and a thousand other twisted emotional patterns? Each one overlying and yet blending with the other, like a pile of semitransparent masks?"

Miss Millick gave a little self-conscious shiver and said, "My, that would be terrible. What an awful thing to think of."

She peered at him furtively across the desk. Was he going crazy? She remembered having heard that there had been something impressively abnormal about Mr. Wran's childhood, but she couldn't recall what it was. If only she could do something—joke at him or ask him what was really wrong. She shifted around the extra pencils in her left hand and mechanically traced over some of the shorthand curlicues in her notebook.

"Yet, that's just what such a ghost or vitalized projection would look like, Miss Millick," he continued, smiling in a tight way. "It would grow out of the real world. It would reflect all the tangled, sordid, vicious, things. All the loose ends. And it would be very grimy. I don't think it would seem white or wispy or favor graveyards. It wouldn't moan. But it would mutter unintelligibly, and twitch at your sleeve. Like a sick, surly ape. What would such a thing want from a person, Miss Millick? Sacrifice? Worship? Or just fear? What could you do to stop it from troubling you?"

Miss Millick giggled nervously. She felt embarrassed and out of her depth. There was an expression beyond her powers of definition in Mr. Wran's ordinary, flat-cheeked, thirty-ish face, silhouetted against the dusty window. He turned away and stared out into the gray downtown atmosphere that rolled in from the railroad yards and the mills. When he spoke again his voice sounded far away.

"Of course, being immaterial, it couldn't hurt you physically—at first. You'd have to be peculiarly sensitive even to see it, or be aware of it at all. But it would begin to influence your actions. Make you do this. Stop you from doing that. Although only a projection, it would gradually get its hooks into the world of things as they are. Might even get control of suitably vacuous minds. Then it could hurt whomever it wanted."

Miss Millick squirmed and tried to read back her shorthand, like books said you should do when there was a pause. She became aware of the failing light and wished Mr. Wran would ask her to turn on the overhead light. She felt uncomfortable and scratchy as if soot were sifting down on to her skin.

"It's a rotten world, Miss Millick," said Mr. Wran, talking at the window. "Fit for another morbid growth of superstition. It's time the ghosts, or whatever you call them, took over and began a rule of fear. They'd be no worse than men."

"But"—Miss Millick's diaphram jerked, making her titter inanely—"of course there aren't any such things as ghosts."

Mr. Wran turned around. She noticed with a start that his grin had broadened, though without getting any less tight.

"Of course there aren't, Miss Millick," he said in a sudden loud, reassuring, almost patronizing voice, as if she had been doing the talking rather than he. "Modern science and common sense and better self-understanding all go to prove it."

He stopped, staring past her abstractedly. She hung her head and might even have blushed if she hadn't felt so all at sea. Her leg muscles twitched, making her stand up, although she hadn't intended to. She aimlessly rubbed her hand back and forth along the edge of the desk, then pulled it back.

"Why, Mr. Wran, look what I got off your desk," she said, showing him a heavy smudge. There was a note of cumbersomely playful reproof in her voice, but she really just wanted to be saying something. "No wonder the copy I bring you always gets so black. Somebody ought to talk to those scrubwomen. They're skimping on your room."

She wished he would make some normal joking reply. But instead he drew back and his face hardened.

"Well, to get back to the letter to Fredericks," he rapped out harshly, and began to dictate.

When she was gone he jumped up, dabbed his finger experimentally at the smudged part of the desk, frowned worriedly at the almost inky smears. He jerked open a drawer, snatched out a rag, hastily swabbed off the desk, crumpled the rag into a ball and tossed it back. There were three or four other rags in the drawer, each impregnated with soot.

Then he strode over to the window and peered out anxiously through the gathering dusk, his eyes searching the panorama of roofs, fixing on each chimney, each water tank.

"It's a psychosis. Must be. Hallucination. Compulsion neurosis," he muttered to himself in a tired, distraught voice that would have made Miss Millick gasp. "Good thing I'm seeing the psychiatrist tonight. It's that damned mental abnormality cropping up in a new form. Can't be any other explanation. Can't be. But it's so damned real. Even the soot. I don't think I could force myself to get on the elevated tonight. Good thing I made the appointment. The doctor will know—" His voice trailed off, he rubbed his eyes, and his memory automatically started to grind.

It had all begun on the elevated. There was a particular little sea of roofs he had grown into the habit of

glancing at just as the packed car carrying him homeward lurched around a turn. A dingy, melancholy little world of tar paper, tarred gravel, and smoky brick. Rusty tin chimneys with odd conical hats suggested abandoned listening posts. There was a washed-out advertisement of some ancient patent medicine on the nearest wall. Superficially it was like ten thousand other drab city roofs. But he always saw it around dusk, either in the normal smoky half-light, or tinged with red by the flat rays of a dirty sunset, or covered by ghostly windblown white sheets of rain-splash, or patched with blackish snow; and it seemed unusually bleak and suggestive, almost beautifully ugly, though in no sense picturesque; dreary but meaningful. Unconsciously it came to symbolize for Catesby Wran certain disagreeable aspects of the frustrated, frightened century in which he lived, the jangled century of hate and heavy industry and Fascist wars. The quick, daily glance into the half darkness became an integral part of his life. Oddly, he never saw it in the morning, for it was then his habit to sit on the other side of the car, his head buried in the paper.

One evening toward winter he noticed what seemed to be a shapeless black sack lying on the third roof from the tracks. He did not think about it. It merely registered as an addition to the well-known scene and his memory stored away the impression for further reference. Next evening, however, he decided he had been mistaken in one detail. The object was a roof nearer than he had thought. Its color and texture, and the grimy stains around it, suggested that it was filled with coal dust, which was hardly reasonable. Then, too, the following evening it seemed to have been blown against a rusty ventilator by the wind—which could hardly have happened if it were at all heavy. Perhaps it was filled with leaves. Catesby was surprised to find himself anticipating his next daily glance with a minor note of apprehension. There was something unwholesome in the posture of the thing that stuck in his mind—a bulge in the sacking that suggested a misshapen head peering around the ventilator. And his apprehension was justified, for that evening the thing was on the nearest roof, though on the farther side, looking as if it had just flopped down over the low brick parapet.

Next evening the sack was gone. Catesby was annoyed at the momentary feeling of relief that went through him, because the whole matter seemed too unimportant to warrant feelings of any sort. What difference did it make if his imagination had played tricks on him, and he'd fancied that the object was crawling and hitching itself slowly closer across the roofs? That was the way any normal imagination worked. He deliberately chose to disregard the fact that there were reasons for thinking his imagination was by no means a normal one. As he walked home from the elevated, however, he found himself wondering whether the sack was really gone. He seemed to recall a vague, smudgy trail leading across the gravel to the nearer side of the roof. For an instant an unpleasant picture formed in his mind—that of an inky, humped creature crouched behind the nearer parapet, waiting. Then he dismissed the whole subject.

The next time he felt the familiar grating lurch of the car, he caught himself trying not to look out. That angered him. He turned his head quickly. When he turned it back, his compact face was definitely pale. There had only been time for a fleeting rearward glance at the escaping roof. Had he actually seen in silhouette the upper part of a head of some sort peering over the parapet? Nonsense, he told himself. And even if he had seen something, there were a thousand explanations which did not involve the supernatural or even true hallucination. Tomorrow he would take a good look and clear up the whole matter. If necessary, he would visit the roof personally, though he hardly knew where to find it and disliked in any case the idea of pampering a whim of fear.

He did not relish the walk home from the elevated that evening, and visions of the thing disturbed his dreams and were in and out of his mind all next day at the office. It was then that he first began to relieve his nerves by making jokingly serious remarks about the supernatural to Miss Millick, who seemed properly mystified. It was on the same day, too, that he became aware of a growing antipathy to grime and soot. Everything he touched seemed gritty, and he found himself mopping and wiping at his desk like an old lady with a morbid fear of germs. He reasoned that there was no real change in his office, and that he'd just now become sensitive to the dirt that had always been there, but there was no denying an increasing nervousness. Long before the car reached the curve, he was straining his eyes through the murky twilight determined to take in every detail.

Afterward he realized that he must have given a muffled cry of some sort, for the man beside him looked at him curiously, and the woman ahead gave him an unfavorable stare. Conscious of his own pallor and uncontrollable trembling, he stared back at them hungrily, trying to regain the feeling of security he had completely lost. They were the usual reassuringly wooden-faced people everyone rides home with on the elevated. But suppose he had pointed out to one of them what he had seen—that sodden, distorted face of sacking and coal dust, that boneless paw which waved back and forth, unmistakably in his direction, as if reminding him of a future appointment— He involuntarily shut his eyes tight. His thoughts were racing ahead to tomorrow evening. He pictured this same windowed oblong of light and packed humanity surging around the curve—then an opaque monstrous form leaping out from the roof in a parabolic swoop—an unmentionable face pressed close against the window, smearing it with wet coal dust—huge paws fumbling sloppily at the glass—

Somehow he managed to turn off his wife's anxious inquiries. Next morning he reached a decision and made an appointment for that evening with a psychiatrist a friend had told him about. It cost him a considerable effort for Catesby had a peculiarly great and very

well-grounded distaste for anything dealing with psychological abnormality. Visiting a psychiatrist meant raking up an episode in his past which he had never fully described even to his wife and which Miss Millick only knew of as "something impressively abnormal about Mr. Wran's childhood." Once he had made the decision, however, he felt considerably relieved. The doctor, he told himself, would clear everything up. He could almost fancy the doctor saying, "Merely a bad case of nerves. However, you must consult the oculist whose name I'm writing down for you, and you must take two of these pills in water every hour," and so on. It was almost comforting, and made the coming revelation he would have to make seem less painful.

But as the smoky dusk rolled in, his nervousness returned and he let his joking mystification of Miss Millick run away with him until he realized that he wasn't frightening anyone but himself.

He would have to keep his imagination under better control, he told himself, as he continued to peer out restlessly at the massive, murky shapes of the downtown office buildings. Why, he had spent the whole afternoon building up a kind of neomedieval cosmology of superstition. It wouldn't do. He realized then that he had been standing at the window much longer than he'd thought, for the glass panel in the door was dark and there was no noise coming from the outer office. Miss Millick and the rest must already have gone home.

It was then he made the discovery that there would have been no special reason for dreading the swing around the curve that night. It was, as it happened, a horrible discovery. For, on the shadowed roof across the street and four stories below, he saw the thing huddle and roll across the gravel and, after one upward look of recognition, merge into the blackness beneath the water tank.

As he hurriedly collected his things and made for the elevator, fighting the panicky impulse to run, he began to think of hallucination and mild psychosis as very desirable conditions. For better or for worse, he pinned all his hopes on the doctor.

"So you find yourself growing nervous and . . . er . . . jumpy, as you put it," said Dr. Trevethick, smiling with dignified geniality. "Do you notice any more definite physical symptoms? Pain? Headache? Indigestion?"

Catesby shook his head and wet his lips. "I'm especially nervous while riding in the elevated," he murmured swiftly.

"I see. We'll discuss that more fully. But I'd like you first to tell me about something you mentioned earlier. You said there was something about your childhood that might predispose you to nervous ailments. As you know, the early years are critical ones in the development of an individual's behavior pattern."

Catesby studied the yellow reflections of frosted globes in the dark surface of the desk. The palm of his left hand aimlessly rubbed the thick nap of the armchair. After a while he raised his head and looked straight into the doctor's small brown eyes.

"From perhaps my third to my ninth year," he began, choosing the words with care, "I was what you might call a sensory prodigy."

The doctor's expression did not change. "Yes?" he inquired politely.

"What I mean is that I was supposed to be able to see through walls, read letters through envelopes and books through their covers, fence and play Ping-pong blindfolded, find things that were buried, read thoughts." The words tumbled out.

"And could you?" The doctor's expression was toneless.

"I don't know. I don't suppose so," answered Catesby, long-lost emotions flooding back into his voice. "It's all so confused now. I thought I could, but then they were always encouraging me. My mother . . . was . . . well . . . interested in psychic phenomena. I was . . . exhibited. I seem to remember seeing things other people couldn't. As if most opaque objects were transparent. But I was very young. I didn't have any scientific criteria for judgment."

He was reliving it now. The darkened rooms. The earnest assemblages of gawking, prying adults. Himself sitting alone on a little platform, lost in a straight-backed wooden chair. The black silk handkerchief over his eyes. His mother's coaxing, insistent questions. The whispers. The gasps. His own hate of the whole business, mixed with hunger for the adulation of adults. Then the scientists from the university, the experiments, the big test. The reality of those memories engulfed him and momentarily made him forget the reason why he was disclosing them to a stranger.

"Do I understand that your mother tried to make use of you as a medium for communicating with the . . . er . . . other world?"

Catesby nodded eagerly.

"She tried to, but she couldn't. When it came to getting in touch with the dead, I was a complete failure. All I could do—or thought I could do—was see real, existing, three-dimensional objects beyond the vision of normal people. Objects they could have seen except for distance, obstruction, or darkness. It was always a disappointment to mother," he finished slowly.

He could hear her sweetish patient voice saying, "Try again, dear, just this once. Katie was your aunt. She loved you. Try to hear what she's saying." And he had answered, "I can see a woman in a blue dress standing on the other side of Jones' house." And she had replied, "Yes, I know, dear. But that's not Katie. Katie's a spirit. Try again. Just this once, dear." For a second time the doctor's voice gently jarred him back into the softly gleaming office.

"You mentioned scientific criteria for judgment, Mr. Wran. As far as you know, did anyone ever try to apply them to you?"

Catesby's nod was emphatic.

"THEY did. When I was eight, two young psychologists from the university here got interested in me. I guess they considered it a joke at first, and I remember

being very determined to show them I amounted to something. Even now I seem to recall how the note of polite superiority and amused sarcasm drained out of their voices. I suppose they decided at first that it was very clever trickery, but somehow they persuaded mother to let them try me out under controlled conditions. There were lots of tests that seemed very businesslike after mother's slipshod little exhibitions. They found I was still clairvoyant—or so they thought. I got worked up and on edge. They were going to demonstrate my supernormal sensory powers to the university psychology faculty. For the first time I began to worry about whether I'd come through. Perhaps they kept me going at too hard a pace, I don't know. At any rate, when the test came, I couldn't do a thing. Everything became opaque. I got desperate and made things up out of my imagination. I lied. In the end I failed utterly, and I believe the two young psychologists lost their jobs as a result."

He could hear the brusque, bearded man saying, "You've been taken in by a child, Flaxman, a mere child. I'm greatly disturbed. You've put yourself on the same plane as common charlatans. Gentlemen, I ask you to banish from your minds this whole sorry episode. It must never be referred to." He winced at the recollection of his feeling of guilt. But at the same time he was beginning to feel exhilarated and almost light-hearted. Unburdening his long-repressed memories had altered his whole viewpoint. The episodes on the elevated began to take on what seemed their proper proportions as merely the bizarre workings of overwrought nerves, and an overly suggestible mind. The doctor, he anticipated confidently, would disentangle the obscure subconscious causes, whatever they might be. And the whole business would be finished off quickly, just as his childhood experience—which was beginning to seem a little ridiculous now—had been finished off.

"From that day on," he continued, "I never exhibited a trace of my supposed powers. My mother was frantic, and tried to sue the university. I had something like a nervous breakdown. Then the divorce was granted, and my father got custody of me. He did his best to make me forget it. We went on long outdoor vacations, and did a lot of athletics, associated with normal, matter-of-fact people. I went to business college eventually. I'm in advertising now. But," Catesby paused, "now that I'm having nervous symptoms, I'm wondering if there mightn't be a connection. It's not a question of whether I really was clairvoyant or not. Very likely my mother taught me a lot of unconscious deceptions, good enough even to fool young psychology instructors. But don't you think it may have some important bearing on my present condition?"

For several moments the doctor regarded him with a slightly embarrassing professional frown. Then he said quietly, "And is there some . . . er . . . more specific connection between your experiences then and now? Do you by any chance find that you are once again beginning to . . . er . . . see things?"

Catesby swallowed. He had felt an increasing eagerness to unburden himself of his fears, but it was not easy to make a beginning, and the doctor's shrewd question rattled him. He forced himself to concentrate. The thing he thought he had seen on the roof loomed up before his inner eye with unexpected vividness. Yet it did not frighten him. He groped for words.

Then he saw that the doctor was not looking at him but over his shoulder. Color was draining out of the doctor's face and his eyes did not seem so small. Then the doctor sprang to his feet, walked past Catesby, threw open the window and peered into the darkness.

As Catesby rose, the doctor slammed down the window and said in a voice whose smoothness was marred by a slight, persistent gasping, "I hope I haven't alarmed you. I saw the face of . . . er . . . a Negro prowler on the fire escape. I must have frightened him, for he seems to have gotten out of sight in a hurry. Don't give it another thought. Doctors are frequently bothered by *voyeurs* . . . er . . . Peeping Toms."

"A Negro?" asked Catesby, moistening his lips.

The doctor laughed nervously. "I imagine so, though my first odd impression was that it was a white man in blackface. You see, the color didn't seem to have any brown in it. It was dead-black."

Catesby moved toward the window. There were smudges on the glass. "It's quite all right, Mr. Wran." The doctor's voice had acquired a sharp note of impatience, as if he were trying hard to get control of himself and reassume his professional authority. "Let's continue our conversation. I was asking you if you were"—he made a face—"seeing things."

Catesby's whirling thoughts slowed down and locked into place. "No, I'm not seeing anything . . . other people don't see, too. And I think I'd better go now. I've been keeping you too long." He disregarded the doctor's half-hearted gesture of denial. "I'll phone you about the physical examination. In a way you've already taken a big load off my mind." He smiled woodenly. "Good night, Dr. Trevethick,"

Catesby Wran's mental state was a peculiar one. His eyes searched every angular shadow and he glanced sideways down each chasmlike alley and barren basement passageway and kept stealing looks at the irregular line of the roofs, yet he was hardly conscious of where he was going in a general way. He pushed away the thoughts that came into his mind, and kept moving. He became aware of a slight sense of security as he turned into a lighted street where there were people and high buildings and blinking signs. After a while he found himself in the dim lobby of the structure that housed his office. Then he realized why he couldn't go home—because he might cause his wife and baby to see it, just as the doctor had seen it. And the baby, only two years old.

"Hello, Mr. Wran," said the night elevator man, a burly figure in blue overalls, sliding open the grillework door to the old-fashioned cage. "I didn't know you were working nights now."

Catesby stepped in automatically. "Sudden rush of orders," he murmured inanely. "Some stuff that has to be gotten out."

The cage creaked to a stop at the top floor. "Be working very late, Mr. Wran?"

He nodded vaguely, watched the car slide out of sight, found his keys, swiftly crossed the outer office, and entered his own. His hand went out to the light switch, but then the thought occurred to him that the two lighted windows, standing out against the dark bulk of the building, would indicate his whereabouts and serve as a goal toward which something could crawl and climb. He moved his chair so that the back was against the wall and sat down in the semidarkness. He did not remove his overcoat.

For a long time he sat there motionless, listening to his own breathing and the faraway sounds from the streets below; the thin metallic surge of the crosstown streetcar, the farther one of the elevated, faint lonely cries and honkings, indistinct rumblings. Words he had spoken to Miss Millick in nervous jest came back to him with the bitter taste of truth. He found himself unable to reason critically or connectedly, but by their own volition thoughts rose up into his mind and gyrated slowly and rearranged themselves, with the inevitable movement of planets.

Gradually his mental picture of the world was transformed. No longer a world of material atoms and empty space, but a world in which the bodiless existed and moved according to its own obscure laws or unpredictable impulses. The new picture illumined with dreadful clarity certain general facts which had always bewildered and troubled him and from which he had tried to hide; the inevitability of hate and war, the diabolically timed mischances which wrecked the best of human intentions, the walls of willful misunderstanding that divided one man from another, the eternal vitality of cruelty and ignorance and greed. They seemed appropriate now, necessary parts of the picture. And superstition only a kind of wisdom.

Then his thoughts returned to himself, and the question he had asked Miss Millick came back, "What would such a thing want from a person? Sacrifices? Worship? Or just fear? What could you do to stop it from troubling you?" It had now become a purely practical question.

With an explosive jangle, the phone began to ring. "Cate, I've been trying everywhere to get you," said his

wife. "I never thought you'd be at the office. What are you doing? I've been worried."

He said something about work.

"You'll be home right away?" came the faint anxious question. "I'm a little frightened. Ronny just had a scare. It woke him up. He kept pointing to the window saying, 'Black man, black man.' Of course it's something he dreamed. But I'm frightened. You will be home? What's that, dear? Can't you hear me?"

"I will. Right away," he said. Then he was out of the office, buzzing the night bell and peering down the shaft.

He saw it peering up the shaft at him from three floors below, the sacking face pressed close against the iron grille-work. It started up the stair at a shockingly swift, shambling gait, vanishing temporarily from sight as it swung into the second corridor below.

Catesby clawed at the door to the office, realized he had not locked it, pushed it in, slammed and locked it behind him, retreated to the other side of the room, cowered between the filing cases and the wall. His teeth were clicking. He heard the groan of the rising cage. A silhouette darkened the frosted glass of the door, blotting out part of the grotesque reverse of the company name. After a little the door opened.

The big-globed overhead light flared on and, standing just inside the door, her hand on the switch, he saw Miss Millick.

"Why, Mr. Wran," she stammered vacuously, "I didn't know you were here. I'd just come in to do some extra typing after the movie. I didn't . . . but the lights weren't on. What were you—"

He stared at her. He wanted to shout in relief, grab hold of her, talk rapidly. He realized he was grinning hysterically.

"Why, Mr. Wran, what's happened to you?" she asked embarrassedly, ending with a stupid titter. "Are you feeling sick? Isn't there something I can do for you?"

He shook his head jerkily, and managed to say, "No, I'm just leaving. I was doing some extra work myself."

"But you *look* sick," she insisted, and walked over toward him. He inconsequentially realized she must have stepped in mud, for her high-heeled shoes left neat black prints.

"Yes, I'm sure you must be sick. You're so terribly pale." She sounded like an enthusiastic, incompetent nurse. Her face brightened with a sudden inspiration. "I've got something in my bag that'll fix you up right away," she said. "It's for indigestion."

She fumbled at her stuffed oblong purse. He noticed that she was absent-mindedly holding it shut with one hand while she tried to open it with the other. Then, under his very eyes, he saw her bend back the thick prongs of metal locking the purse as if they were tinfoil, or as if her fingers had become a pair of steel pliers.

Instantly his memory recited the words he had spoken to Millick that afternoon. "It couldn't hurt you physically—at first . . . gradually get its hooks into the world . . . might even get control of suitably vacuous minds. Then it could hurt whomever it wanted." A sickish, cold feeling came to a focus inside him. He began to edge toward the door.

But Miss Millick hurried ahead of him.

"You don't have to wait, Fred," she called. "Mr. Wran's decided to stay a while longer."

The door to the cage shut with a mechanical rattle. The cage creaked. Then she turned around in the door.

"Why, Mr. Wran," she gurgled reproachfully, "I just couldn't think of letting you go home now. I'm sure you're terribly unwell. Why, you might collapse in the street. You've just got to stay here until you feel different."

The creaking died away. He stood in the center of the office motionless. His eyes traced the course of Miss Millick's footprints to where she stood blocking the door. Then a sound that was almost a scream was wrenched out of him, for he saw that the flesh of her face was beginning to change color; blackening until the powder on it was a sickly white dust, rouge a hideous pinkish one, lipstick a translucent red film. It was the same with her hands and with the skin beneath her thin silk stockings.

"Why, Mr. Wran," she said, "you're acting as if you were crazy. You must lie down for a little while. Here, I'll help you off with your coat."

The nauseously idiotic and rasping note was the same; only it had been intensified. As she came toward him he turned and ran through the storeroom, clattered a key desperately at the lock of the second door to the corridor.

"Why, Mr. Wran," he heard her call, "are you having some kind of fit? You must let me help you."

The door came open and he plunged out into the corridor and up the stairs immediately ahead. It was only when he reached the top that he realized the heavy steel door in front of him led to the roof. He jerked up the catch.

"Why, Mr. Wran, you mustn't run away. I'm coming after you."

Then he was out on the gritty tar paper of the roof. the night sky was clouded and murky, with a faint pinkish glow from the neon signs. From the distant mills rose a ghostly spurt of flame. He ran to the edge. The street lights glared dizzily upward. Two men walking along were round blobs of hat and shoulders. He swung around.

The thing was in the doorway. The voice was no longer solicitous but moronically playful, each sentence ending in a titter.

"Why, Mr. Wran, why have you come up here? We're all alone. Just think, I might push you off."

The thing came slowly toward him. He moved backward until his heels touched the low parapet. Without knowing why or what he was going to do, he dropped to his knees. The black, coarse-grained face came nearer, a focus for the worst in the world, a gathering point for poisons from everywhere. Then the lucidity

of terror took possession of his mind, and words formed on his lips.

"I will obey you. You are my god," he said. "You have supreme power over man and his animals and his machines. You rule this city and all others. I recognize that. Therefore spare me."

Again the titter, closer. "Why, Mr. Wran, you never talked like this before. Do you mean it?"

"The world is yours to do with as you will, save or tear to pieces," He answered fawningly, as the words automatically fitted themselves together into vaguely liturgical patterns. "I recognize that. I will praise, I will sacrifice. In smoke and soot and flame I will worship you forever."

The voice did not answer. He looked up. There was only Miss Millick, deathly pale and swaying drunkenly. Her eyes were closed. He caught her as she wobbled toward him. His knees gave way under the added weight and they sank down together on the roof edge.

After a while she began to twitch. Small wordless noises came from her throat, and her eyelids edged open.

"Come on, we'll go downstairs," he murmured jerkily, trying to draw her up. "You're feeling bad."

"I'm terribly dizzy," she whispered. "I must have fainted. I didn't eat enough. And then I'm so nervous lately, about the war and everything, I guess. Why, we're on the roof! Did you bring me up here to get some air? Or did I come up without knowing it? I'm awfully foolish. I used to walk in my sleep, my mother said."

As he helped her down the stairs, she turned and looked at him. "Why, Mr. Wran," she said, faintly, "you've got a big smudge on your forehead. Here, let me get it off for you." Weakly she rubbed at it with her handkerchief. She started to sway again and he steadied her.

"No, I'll be all right," she said. "Only I feel cold. What happened, Mr. Wran? Did I have some sort of fainting spell?"

He told her it was something like that.

LATER, riding home in an empty elevated car, he wondered how long he would be safe from the thing. It was a purely practical problem. He had no way of knowing, but instinct told him he had satisfied the brute for some time. Would it want more when it came again? Time enough to answer that question when it arose. It might be hard, he realized, to keep out of an insane asylum. With Helen and Ronny to protect, as well as himself, he would have to be careful and tight-lipped. He began to speculate as to how many other men and women had seen the thing or things like it, and knew that mankind had once again spawned a ghost world, and that superstition once more ruled.

The elevated slowed and lurched in a familiar fashion. He looked at the roofs again, near the curve. They seemed very ordinary, as if what made them impressive had gone away for a while.

THE END.

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A GNOME THERE WAS

By Henry Kuttner

A slightly cockeyed piece concerning a gnome who did not want to be a gnome—and didn't like the way gnomes acted anyway. So—he didn't stay a gnome, but—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

TIM CROCKETT should never have sneaked into the mine on Dornsef Mountain. What is winked at in California may have disastrous results in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. Especially when gnomes are involved.

Not that Tim Crockett knew about the gnomes. He was just investigating conditions among the lower classes, to use his own rather ill-chosen words. He was one of a group of southern Californians who had decided that labor needed them. They were wrong. They needed labor—at least eight hours of it a day.

Crockett, like his colleagues, considered the laborer a combination of a gorilla and The Man with the Hoe, probably numbering the Kallikaks among his ancestors. He spoke fierily of downtrodden minorities, wrote incendiary articles for the group's organ—*Earth*—and deftly maneuvered himself out of entering his father's law office as a clerk. He had, he said, a mission. Unfortunately, he got little sympathy from either the workers or their oppressors.

A psychologist could have analyzed Crockett easily

enough. He was a tall, thin, intense-looking young man, with rather beady little eyes, and a nice taste in neckties. All he needed was a vigorous kick in the pants.

But—definitely!—not administered by a gnome!

He was junketing through the country, on his father's money, investigating labor conditions, to the profound annoyance of such laborers as he encountered. It was with this idea in mind that he surreptitiously got into the Ajax Coal Mine—or, at least, one shaft of it, after disguising himself as a miner and rubbing his face well with black dust. Going down in the lift, he looked singularly untidy in the midst of a group of well-scrubbed faces. Miners look dirty only after a day's work.

Dornsef Mountain is honeycombed, but not with the shafts of the Ajax Co. The gnomes have ways of blocking their tunnels when humans dig too close. The whole place was a complete confusion to Crockett. He let himself drift along with the others, till they began to work. A filled car rumbled past on its tracks. Crockett hesitated, and then sidled over to a husky specimen who seemed to have the marks of a great sorrow stamped on his face.

"Look," he said, "I want to talk to you."

"Inglis?" asked the other inquiringly. "Viskey. Chin. Vine. Hell."

Having thus demonstrated his somewhat incomplete command of English, he bellowed hoarsely with laughter and returned to work, ignoring the baffled Crockett, who turned away to find another victim. But this section of the mine seemed deserted. Another loaded car rumbled past, and Crockett decided to see where it came from. He found out, after banging his head painfully and falling flat at least five times.

It came from a hole in the wall. Crockett entered it, and simultaneously heard a hoarse cry from behind him. The unknown requested Crockett to come back.

"So I can break your slab-sided neck," he promised, adding a stream of sizzling profanity. "Come outa there!"

Crockett cast one glance back, saw a gorillalike shadow lurching after him, and instantly decided that his stratagem had been discovered. The owners of the Ajax mine had sent a strong-arm man to murder him—or, at least, to beat him to a senseless pulp. Terror lent wings to Crockett's flying feet. He rushed on, frantically searching for a side tunnel in which he might lose himself. The bellowing from behind re-echoed against the walls. Abruptly Crockett caught a significant sentence clearly.

"—before that dynamite goes off!"

It was at that exact moment that the dynamite went off.

Crockett, however, did not know it. He discovered, quite briefly, that he was flying. Then he was halted, with painful suddenness, by the roof. After that he knew nothing at all, till he recovered to find a head regarding him steadfastly.

It was not a comforting sort of head—not one at which you would instinctively clutch for companionship. It was, in fact, a singularly odd, if not actually revolting, head. Crockett was too much engrossed with staring at it to realize that he was actually seeing in the dark.

How long had he been unconscious? For some obscure reason Crockett felt that it had been quite a while. The explosion had—what?

Buried him here behind a fallen roof of rock? Crockett would have felt little better had he known that he was in a used-up shaft, valueless now, which had been abandoned long since. The miners, blasting to open a new shaft, had realized that the old one would be collapsed, but that didn't matter.

Except to Tim Crockett.

He blinked, and when he reopened his eyes, the head had vanished. This was a relief. Crockett immediately decided the unpleasant thing had been a delusion. Indeed, it was difficult to remember what it had looked like. There was only a vague impression of a turnip-shaped outline, large luminous eyes, and an incredibly broad slit of a mouth.

Crockett sat up, groaning. Where was this curious silvery radiance coming from? It was like daylight on a foggy afternoon, coming from nowhere in particular, and throwing no shadows. "Radium," thought Crockett, who knew very little of mineralogy.

He was in a shaft that stretched ahead into dimness till it made a sharp turn perhaps fifty feet away. Behind him—behind him the roof had fallen. Instantly Crockett began to experience difficulty in breathing. He flung himself upon the rubbly mound, tossing rocks frantically here and there, gasping and making hoarse, inarticulate noises.

He became aware, presently, of his hands. His movements slowed till he remained perfectly motionless, in a half-crouching posture, glaring at the large, knobbly, and surprising objects that grew from his wrists. Could he, during his period of unconsciousness, have acquired mittens? Even as the thought came to him, Crockett realized that no mittens ever knitted resembled in the slightest degree what he had a right to believe to be his hands. They twitched slightly.

Possibly they were caked with mud—no. It wasn't that. His hands had—altered. They were huge, gnarled, brown objects, like knotted oak roots. Sparse black hairs sprouted on their backs. The nails were definitely in need of a manicure—preferably with a chisel.

Crockett looked down at himself. He made soft cheeping noises, indicative of disbelief. He had squat bow legs, thick and strong, and no more than two feet ong—less, if anything. Uncertain with disbelief, Crockett explored his body. It had changed—certainly not for the better.

He was slightly more than four feet high, and about three feet wide, with a barrel chest, enormous splay feet, stubby thick legs, and no neck whatsoever. He was

wearing red sandals, blue shorts, and a red tunic which left his lean but sinewy arms bare. His head—

Turnip-shaped. The mouth— *Yipe!* Crockett had inadvertently put his fist clear into it. He withdrew the offending hand instantly, stared around in a dazed fashion, and collapsed on the ground. It couldn't be happening. It was quite impossible. Hallucinations. He was dying of asphyxiation, and delusions were preceding his death.

CROCKETT SHUT his eyes, again convinced that his lungs were laboring for breath. "I'm dying," he said. "I c-can't breathe."

A contemptuous voice said, "I hope you don't think you're breathing *air!*"

"I'm n-not—" Crockett didn't finish the sentence. His eyes popped open. He was hearing things—

He heard it again. "You're a singularly lousy specimen of gnome," the voice said, rather hoarsely, as though it had a cold. "But under Nid's law we can't pick and choose. Still, you won't be put to digging hard metals, I can see that. Anthracite's about your speed. What're you staring at? You're *very* much uglier than I am."

Crockett, endeavoring to lick his dry lips, was horrified to discover the end of his moist tongue dragging limply over his eyes. He whipped it back, with a loud smacking noise, and managed to sit up. Then he remained perfectly motionless, staring.

The head had reappeared. This time there was a body under it.

"I'm Gru Magru," said the head chattily. "You'll be given a gnomic name, of course, unless your own is guttural enough. What is it?"

"Crockett," the man responded, in a stunned, automatic manner.

"Hey?"

"Crockett."

"Stop making noises like a frog and—oh, I see. Grockett. Fair enough. Now get up and follow me or I'll kick the pants off you."

But Crockett did not immediately rise. He was watching Gru Magru—obviously a gnome. Short, squat, and stunted, the being's figure resembled a bulging little barrel, topped by an inverted turnip. The hair grew up thickly to a peak—the root, as it were. In the turnip face was a loose, immense slit of a mouth, a button of a nose, and two very large eyes.

"Get *up!*" Gru Magru said.

This time Crockett obeyed, but the effort exhausted him completely. If he moved again, he thought, he would go mad. It would be just as well. Gnomes—

Gru Magru planted a large splay foot where it would do the most good, and Crockett described an arc which ended at a jagged boulder fallen from the roof. "Get up," the gnome said, with gratuitous bad temper, "or I'll kick you again. It's bad enough to have an outlying prospect patrol, where I might run into a man any time, without— *Up!* Or—"

Crockett got up. Gru Magru took his arm and impelled him into the depths of the tunnel.

"Well, you're a gnome now," he said. "It's the Nid law. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth the trouble. But I suppose it is—since gnomes can't propagate, and the average population has to be kept up somehow."

"I want to die," Crockett said wildly.

Gru Magru laughed. "Gnomes *can't* die. They're immortal, till the Day. Judgment Day, I mean."

"You're not logical," Crockett pointed out, as though by disproving one factor he could automatically disprove the whole fantastic business. "You're either flesh and blood and have to die eventually, or you're not, and then you're not real."

"Oh, we're flesh and blood, right enough," Gru Magru said. "But we're not mortal. There's a distinction. Not that I've anything against some mortals," he hastened to explain. "Bats, now—and owls—they're fine. But men!" He shuddered. "No gnome can stand the sight of a man."

Crockett clutched at a straw. "I'm a man."

"You were, you mean," Gru said. "Not a very good specimen, either, for my ore. But you're a gnome now. It's the Nid law."

"You keep talking about the Nid law," Crockett complained.

"Of course you don't understand," said Gru Magru, in a patronizing fashion. "It's this way. Back in ancient times, it was decreed that if any humans got lost in underearth, a tithe of them would be transformed into gnomes. The first gnome emperor, Podrang the Third, arranged that. He saw that fairies could kidnap human children and keep them, and spoke to the authorities about it. Said it was unfair. So when miners and suchlike are lost underearth, a tithe of them are transformed into gnomes and join us. That's what happened to you. See?"

"No," Crockett said weakly. "Look. You said Podrang was the first gnome emperor. Why was he called Podrang the Third?"

"No time for questions," Gru Magru snapped. "Hurry!"

He was almost running now, dragging the wretched Crockett after him. The new gnome had not yet mastered his rather unusual limbs, and, due to the extreme wideness of his sandals, he was continually stepping on his own feet. Once he trod heavily on his right hand, but after that learned to keep his arms bent and close to his sides. The walls, illuminated with that queer silvery radiance, spun past dizzily.

"W-what's that light?" Crockett managed to gasp. "Where's it coming from?"

"Light?" Gru Magru inquired. "It isn't light."

"Well, it isn't dark—"

"Of course it's dark," the gnome snapped. "How could we see if it wasn't dark?"

There was no possible answer to this, except, Crockett thought wildly, a frantic shriek. And he needed all his breath for running. They were in a labyrinth now, turning and twisting and doubling through innumer-

able tunnels, and Crockett knew he could never retrace his steps. He regretted having left the scene of the cave-in. But how could he have helped doing so?

"Hurry!" Gru Magru urged. "Hurry!"

"Why?" Crockett got out breathlessly.

"There's a fight going on!" the gnome said.

JUST THEN they rounded a corner and almost blundered into the fight. A seething mass of gnomes filled the tunnel, battling with frantic fury. Red and blue pants and tunics moved in swift patchwork frenzy; turnip heads popped up and down vigorously. It was apparently a free-for-all.

"See!" Gru gloated. "A fight! I could smell it six tunnels away. Oh, a beauty!" He ducked as a malicious-looking little gnome sprang out of the huddle to seize a rock and hurl it with vicious accuracy. The missile missed its mark, and Gru, neglecting his captive, immediately hurled himself upon the little gnome, bore him down on the cave floor, and began to beat his head against it. Both parties shrieked at the tops of their voices, which were lost in the deafening din that resounded through the tunnel.

"Oh—my," Crockett said weakly. He stood staring, which was a mistake. A very large gnome emerged from the pile, seized Crockett by the feet, and threw him away. The terrified inadvertent projectile sailed through the tunnel to crash heavily into something which said, *"Whoo-oof!"* There was a tangle of malformed arms and legs.

Crockett arose to find that he had downed a vicious-looking gnome with flaming red hair and four large diamond buttons on his tunic. This repulsive creature lay motionless, out for the count. Crockett took stock of his injuries—there were none. His new body was hardy, anyway.

"You saved me!" said a new voice. It belonged to a —a lady gnome. Crockett decided that if there was anything uglier than a gnome, it was the female of the species. The creature stood crouching just behind him, clutching a large rock in one capable hand.

Crockett ducked.

"I won't hurt you," the other howled above the din that filled the passage. "You saved me! Mugza was trying to pull my ears off—oh! He's waking up!"

The red-haired gnome was indeed recovering consciousness. His first act was to draw up his feet and, without rising, kick Crockett clear across the tunnel. The feminine gnome immediately sat on Mugza's chest and pounded his head with the rock till he subsided.

Then she arose. "You're not hurt? Good! I'm Brockle Buhn . . . oh, look! He'll have his head off in a minute!"

Crockett turned to see that his erstwhile guide, Gru Magru, was gnomefully tugging at the head of an

unidentified opponent, attempting, apparently, to twist it clear off. "What's it all about?" Crockett howled. "Uh . . . Brockle Buhn! *Brockle Buhn!*"

She turned unwillingly. "What?"

"The fight! What started it?"

"I did," she explained. "I said, 'Let's have a fight.'"

"Oh—that was all?"

"Then we started," Brockle Buhn nodded. "What's your name?"

"Crockett."

"You're new here, aren't you? Oh—I know! You were a human!" Suddenly a new light appeared in her bulging eyes. "Crockett, maybe you can tell me something. What's a kiss?"

"A—kiss?" Crockett repeated, in a baffled manner.

"Yes. I was listening inside a knoll once, and heard two humans talking—male and female, by their voices. I didn't dare look at them, of course, but the man asked the woman for a kiss."

"Oh," Crockett said, rather blankly. "He asked for a kiss, eh?"

"And then there was a smacking noise and the woman said it was wonderful. I wondered ever since. Because if any gnome asked me for a kiss, I wouldn't know what he meant."

"Gnomes don't kiss?" Crockett asked in a perfunctory way.

"Gnomes dig," said Brockle Buhn. "And we eat. I like to eat. Is a kiss like mud soup?"

"Well, not exactly." Somehow Crockett managed to explain the mechanics of osculation.

The gnome remained silent, pondering deeply. At last she said, with the air of one bestowing mud soup upon a hungry applicant, "I'll give you a kiss."

Crockett had a nightmare picture of his whole head being engulfed in that enormous maw. He backed away. "N-no," he got out. "I . . . I'd rather not."

"Then let's fight," said Brockle Buhn, without rancor, and swung a knotted fist which smacked painfully athwart Crockett's ear. "Oh, no," she said regretfully, turning away. "The fight's over. It wasn't very long, was it?"

CROCKETT, rubbing his mangled ear, saw that in every direction gnomes were picking themselves up and hurrying off about their business. They seemed to have forgotten all about the recent conflict. The tunnel was once more silent, save for the pad-padding of gnomes' feet on the rock. Gru Magru came over, grinning happily.

"Hello, Brockle Buhn," he greeted. "A good fight. Who's this?" He looked down at the prostrate body of Mugza, the red-haired gnome.

"Mugza," said Brockle Buhn. "He's still out. Let's kick him."

They proceeded to do it with vast enthusiasm, while Crockett watched and decided never to allow himself to be knocked unconscious. It definitely wasn't safe. At last, however, Gru Magru tired of the sport and took Crockett by the arm again. "Come along," he said, and they sauntered along the tunnel, leaving Brockle Buhn jumping up and down on the senseless Mugza's stomach.

"You don't seem to mind hitting people when they're knocked out," Crockett hazarded.

"It's *much* more fun," Gru said happily. "That way you can tell just where you want to hit 'em. Come along. You'll have to be inducted. Another day, another gnome. Keeps the population stable," he explained, and fell to humming a little song.

"Look," Crockett said. "I just thought of something. You say humans are turned into gnomes to keep the population stable. But if gnomes don't die, doesn't that mean that there are more gnomes now than ever? The population keeps rising, doesn't it?"

"Be still," Gru Magru commanded. "I'm singing."

It was a singularly tuneless song. Crockett, his thoughts veering madly, wondered if the gnomes had a national anthem. Probably "Rock Me to Sleep." Oh, well.

"We're going to see the emperor," Gru said at last. "He always sees the new gnomes. You'd better make a good impression, or he'll put you to placer-mining lava."

"Uh—" Crockett glanced down at his grimy tunic. "Hadn't I better clean up a bit? That fight made me a mess."

"It wasn't the fight," Gru said insultingly. "What's wrong with you, anyway? I don't see anything amiss."

"My clothes—they're dirty."

"Don't worry about that," said the other. "It's good filthy dirt, isn't it? Here!" He halted, and, stooping, seized a handful of dust which he rubbed into Crockett's face and hair. "That'll fix you up."

"I . . . *pffh!* . . . thanks . . . *pffh!*" said the newest gnome. "I hope I'm dreaming. Because if I'm not—" He didn't finish. Crockett was feeling most unwell.

THEY WENT through a labyrinth, far under Dornsef Mountain, and emerged at last in a bare, huge chamber with a throne of rock at one end of it. A small gnome was sitting on the throne paring his toenails. "Bottom of the day to you," Gru said. "Where's the emperor?"

"Taking a bath," said the other. "I hope he drowns. Mud, mud, mud, morning noon and night. First it's too hot. Then it's too cold. Then it's too thick. I work my fingers to the bone mixing his mud baths, and all I get is a kick," the small gnome continued plaintively. "There's such a thing as being *too* dirty. Three mud baths a day—that's carrying it too far. And never a thought for me! Oh, no. I'm a mud puppy, that's what I am. He called me that today. Said there were lumps in the mud. Well, why not? That damned loam we've been getting is enough to turn a worm's stomach. You'll find His Majesty in there," the little gnome finished, jerking his foot toward an archway in the wall.

Crockett was dragged into the next room, where, in a sunken bath filled with steaming, brown mud, a very fat gnome sat, only his eyes discernible through the

oozy coating that covered him. He was filling his hands with mud and letting it drip over his head, chuckling in a senile sort of way as he did so.

"Mud," he remarked pleasantly to Gru Magru, in a voice like a lion's bellow. "Nothing like it. Good rich mud. Ah!"

Gru was bumping his head on the floor, his large, capable hand around Crockett's neck forcing the other to follow suit.

"Oh, get up," said the emperor. "What's this? What's this gnome been up to? Out with it."

"He's new," Gru explained. "I found him topside. The Nid law, you know."

"Yes, of course. Let's have a look at you. Ugh! I'm Podrang the Second, Emperor of the Gnomes. What have you to say to that?"

All Crockett could think of was: "How . . . how can you be Podrang the Second? I thought Podrang the Third was the first emperor?"

"A chatterbox," said Podrang II, disappearing beneath the surface of the mud and spouting as he rose again. "Take care of him, Gru. Easy work at first. Digging anthracite. Mind you don't eat any while you're on the job," he cautioned the dazed Crockett. "After you've been here a century, you're allowed one mud bath a day. Nothing like 'em," he added, bringing up a gluey handful to smear over his face.

Abruptly he stiffened. His lion's bellow rang out. "Drook! *Drook!*"

The little gnome Crockett had seen in the throne room scurried in, ringing his hands. "Your majesty! Isn't the mud warm enough?"

"You crawling blob!" roared Podrang II. "You slobbering offspring of six thousand individual offensive stenches! You mica-eyed, incompetent, draggle-eared, writhing blot on the good name of gnomes! You geological mistake! You . . . you—"

Drook took advantage of his master's temporary inarticulacy. "It's the best mud, your majesty! I refined it myself. Oh, your majesty, what's wrong?"

"There's a worm in it!" His Majesty bellowed, and launched into a stream of profanity so horrendous that it practically made the mud boil. Clutching his singed ears, Crockett allowed Gru Magru to drag him away.

"I'd like to get the old boy in a fight," Gru remarked, when they were safely in the depths of a tunnel, "but he'd use magic, of course. That's the way he is. Best emperor we've ever had. Not a scrap of fair play in his bloated body."

"Oh," Crockett said blankly. "Well, what next?"

"You heard Podrang, didn't you? You dig anthracite. And if you eat any, I'll kick your teeth in."

Brooding over the apparent bad tempers of gnomes, Crockett allowed himself to be conducted to a gallery where dozens of gnomes, both male and female, were using picks and mattocks with furious vigor. "This is it," Gru said. "Now! You dig anthracite. You work twenty hours, and then sleep six."

"Then what?"

"Then you start digging again," Gru explained. "You have a brief rest once every ten hours. You mustn't stop digging in between, unless it's for a fight. Now here's the way you locate coal. Just think of it."

"Eh?"

"How do you think I found you?" Gru asked impatiently. "Gnomes have—certain senses. There's a legend that fairy folk can locate water by using a forked stick. Well, we're attracted to metals. Think of anthracite," he finished, and Crockett obeyed. Instantly he found himself turning to the wall of the tunnel nearest him.

"See how it works?" Gru grinned. "It's a natural evolution, I suppose. Functional. We have to know where the undererth deposits are, so the authorities gave us this sense when we were created. Think of ore—or any deposit in the ground—and you'll be attracted to it. Just as there's a repulsion in all gnomes against daylight."

"Eh?" Crockett started slightly. "What was that?"

"Negative and positive. We need ores, so we're attracted to them. Daylight is harmful to us, so if we think we're getting too close to the surface, we think of light, and it repels us. Try it!"

Crockett obeyed. Something seemed to be pressing down the top of his head—

"Straight up," Gru nodded. "But it's a long way. I saw daylight once. And—a man, too." He stared at the other. "I forgot to explain. Gnomes can't stand the sight of human beings. They—well, there's a limit to how much ugliness a gnome can look at. Now you're one of us, you'll feel the same way. Keep away from daylight, and never look at a man. It's as much as your sanity is worth."

There was a thought stirring in Crockett's mind. He could, then, find his way out of this maze of tunnels, simply by employing his new sense to lead him to daylight. After that—well, at least he would be above ground.

Gru Magru shoved Crockett into a place between two busy gnomes and thrust a pick into his hands. "There. Get to work."

"Thanks for—" Crockett began, when Gru suddenly kicked him and then took his departure, humming happily to himself. Another gnome came up, saw Crockett standing motionless, and told him to get busy, accompanying the command with a blow on his already tender ear. Perforce Crockett seized the pick and began to chop anthracite out of the wall.

"Crockett!" said a familiar voice. "It's you! I thought they'd send you here."

It was Brockle Buhn, the feminine gnome Crockett had already encountered. She was swinging a pick with the others, but dropped it now to grin at her companion.

"You won't be here long," she consoled. "Ten years or so. Unless you run into trouble, and then you'll be put at really hard work."

Crockett's arms were already aching. *"Hard* work! My arms are going to fall off in a minute."

He leaned on his pick. "Is this your regular job?"

"Yes—but I'm seldom here. Usually I'm being punished. I'm a trouble-maker, I am. I eat anthracite."

She demonstrated, and Crockett shuddered at the audible crunching sound. Just then the overseer came up. Brockle Buhn swallowed hastily.

"What's this?" he snarled. "Why aren't you at work?"

"We were just going to fight," Brockle Buhn explained.

"Oh—just the two of you? Or can I join in?"

"Free for all," the unladylike gnome offered, and struck the unsuspecting Crockett over the head with her pick. He went out like a light.

Awakening some time later, he investigated bruised ribs and decided Brockle Buhn must have kicked him after he'd lost consciousness. What a gnome! Crockett sat up, finding himself in the same tunnel, dozens of gnomes busily digging anthracite.

The overseer came toward him. "Awake, eh? Get to work!"

Dazedly Crockett obeyed. Brockle Buhn flashed him a delighted grin. "You missed it. I got an ear—see?" She exhibited it. Crockett hastily lifted an exploring hand. It wasn't his.

Dig—dig—dig—the hours dragged past. Crockett

had never worked so hard in his life. But, he noticed, not a gnome complained. Twenty hours of toil, with one brief rest period—he'd slept through that. Dig—dig—dig—

Without ceasing her work, Brockle Buhn said, "I think you'll make a good gnome, Grockett. You're toughening up already. Nobody'd ever believe you were once a man."

"Oh—no?"

"No. What were you—a miner?"

"I was—" Crockett paused suddenly. A curious light came into his eyes.

"I was a labor organizer," he finished.

"What's that?"

"Ever heard of a union?" Crockett asked, his gaze intent.

"Is it an ore?" Brockle Buhn shook her head. "No, I've never heard of it. What's a union?"

Crockett explained. No genuine labor organizer would have accepted that explanation. It was, to say the least, biased.

Brockle Buhn seemed puzzled. "I don't see what you mean, exactly, but I suppose it's all right."

"Try another tack," Crockett said. "Don't you ever get tired of working twenty hours a day?"

"Sure. Who wouldn't?"

"Then why do it?"

"We always have," Brockle Buhn said indulgently. "We can't stop."

"Suppose you did?"

"I'd be punished—beaten with stalactites, or something."

"Suppose you all did," Crockett insisted. "Every damn gnome. Suppose you had a sit-down strike."

"You're crazy," Brockle Buhn said. "Such a thing's never happened. It . . . it's *human.*"

"Kisses never happened underground, either," said Crockett. "No, I don't want one! And I don't want to fight, either. Good heavens—let me get the set-up here. Most of the gnomes work to support the privileged classes."

"No. We just work."

"But why?"

"We always have. And the emperor wants us to."

"Has the emperor ever worked?" Crockett demanded, with an air of triumph. "No! He just takes mud baths! Why shouldn't every gnome have the same privilege? Why—"

He talked on, at great length, as he worked. Brockle Buhn listened with increasing interest. And eventually she swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker.

An hour later she was nodding agreeably. "I'll pass the word along. Tonight. In the Roaring Cave. Right after work."

"Wait a minute," Crockett objected. "How many gnomes can you get?"

"Well—not very many. Thirty?"

"We'll have to organize first. We'll need a definite plan—"

Brockle Buhn went off at a tangent. "Let's fight."

"No! Will you listen? We need a . . . a council. Who's the worst trouble-maker here?"

"Mugza, I think," she said. "The red-haired gnome you knocked out when he hit me."

Crockett frowned slightly. Would Mugza hold a grudge? Probably not, he decided. Or, rather, he'd be no more ill-tempered than other gnomes. Mugza might attempt to throttle Crockett on sight, but he'd no doubt do the same to any other gnome. Besides, as Brockle Buhn went on to explain, Mugza was the gnomic equivalent of a duke. His support would be valuable.

"And Gru Magru," she suggested. "He loves new things, especially if they make trouble."

"Yeah—" These were not the two Crockett would have chosen, but at least he could think of no other candidates. "If we could get somebody who's close to the emperor . . . what about Drook? The guy who gives Podrang his mud baths?"

"Why not? I'll fix it." Brockle Buhn lost interest and surreptitiously began to eat anthracite. Since the overseer was watching, this resulted in a violent quarrel, from which Crockett emerged with a black eye. Whispering profanity under his breath, he went back to digging.

But he had time for a few more words with Brockle Buhn. She'd arrange it. That night there would be a secret meeting of the conspirators.

Crockett had been looking forward to exhausted slumber, but this chance was too good to miss. He had no wish to continue his unpleasant job digging anthracite. His body ached fearfully. Besides, if he could induce the gnomes to strike, he might be able to put the squeeze on Podrang II. Gru Magru had said the emperor was a magician. Couldn't he, then, transform Crockett back into a man?

"He's never done that," Brockle Buhn said, and Crockett realized he had spoken his thought aloud.

"Couldn't he, though—if he wanted?"

Brockle Buhn merely shuddered, but Crockett had a little gleam of hope. To be human again!

Dig—dig—dig—with monotonous, deadening regularity. Crockett sank into a stupor. Unless he got the gnomes to strike, he was faced with an eternity of arduous toil. He was scarcely conscious of knocking off, of feeling Brockle Buhn's gnarled hand under his arm, of being led through passages to a tiny cubicle which was his new home. The gnome left him there, and he crawled into a stony bunk and went to sleep.

Presently a casual kick roused him. Blinking, Crockett sat up, instinctively dodging the blow Gru Magru was aiming at his head. He had four guests—Gru, Brockle Buhn, Drook, and the red-haired Mugza.

"Sorry I woke up too soon," Crockett said bitterly. "If I hadn't, you could have got in another kick."

"There's lots of time," Gru said. "Now what's this all about? I wanted to sleep, but Brockle Buhn here said there was going to be a fight. A *big* one—huh?"

"Eat first," Brockle Buhn said firmly. "I'll fix mud soup for everybody." She bustled away, and presently was busy in a corner, preparing refreshments. The other gnomes squatted on their haunches, and Crockett sat on the edge of his bunk, still dazed with sleep.

But he managed to explain his idea of the union. It was received with interest—chiefly, he felt, because it involved the possibility of a tremendous scrap.

"You mean every Dornsef gnome jumps the emperor?" Gru asked.

"No, no! Peaceful arbitration. We just refuse to work. All of us."

"*I* can't," Drook said. "Podrang's got to have his mud baths, the bloated old slug. He'd send me to the fumaroles till I was toasted."

"Who'd take you there?" Crockett asked.

"Oh—the guards, I suppose."

"But they'd be on strike, too. *Nobody'd* obey Podrang, till he gave in."

"Then he'd enchant me," Drook said.

"He can't enchant us all," Crockett countered.

"But he could enchant *me*," Drook said with great firmness. "Besides, he *could* put a spell on every gnome in Dornsef. Turn us into stalactites or something."

"Then what? He wouldn't have any gnomes at all. Half a loaf is better than none. We'll just use logic on him. Wouldn't he rather have a little less work done than none at all?"

"Not him," Gru put in. "He'd rather enchant us. Oh, he's a bad one, he is," the gnome finished approvingly.

But Crockett couldn't quite believe this. It was too alien to his understanding of psychology—human psychology, of course. He turned to Mugza, who was glowering furiously.

"What do you think about it?"

"I want to fight," the other said rancorously. "I want to kick somebody."

"Wouldn't you rather have mud baths three times a day?"

Mugza grunted. "Sure. But the emperor won't let me."

"Why not?"

"Because I want 'em."

"You can't be contented," Crockett said desperately. "There's more to life than . . . than digging."

"Sure. There's fighting. Podrang lets us fight whenever we want."

Crockett had a sudden inspiration. "But that's just it. He's going to stop all fighting! He's going to pass a new law forbidding fighting except to himself."

It was an effective shot in the dark. Every gnome jumped.

"Stop—*fighting!*" That was Gru, angry and disbelieving. "Why, we've always fought."

"Well, you'll have to stop," Crockett insisted.

"Won't!"

"Exactly! Why should you? Every gnome's entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of . . . of pugilism."

"Let's go and beat up Podrang," Mugza offered, accepting a steaming bowl of mud soup from Brockle Buhn.

"No, that's not the way . . . no, thanks, Brockle Buhn . . . not the way at all. A strike's the thing. We'll peaceably force Podrang to give us what we want."

He turned to Drook. "Just what can Podrang do about it if we all sit down and refuse to work?"

The little gnome considered. "He'd swear. And kick me."

"Yeah—and then what?"

"Then he'd go off and enchant everybody, tunnel by tunnel."

"Uh-huh," Crockett nodded. "A good point. Solidarity is what we need. If Podrang finds a few gnomes together, he can scare the hell out of them. But if we're all together—that's it! When the strike's called, we'll all meet in the biggest cave in the joint."

"That's the Council Chamber," Gru said. "Next to Podrang's throne room."

"O. K. We'll meet there. How many gnomes will join us?"

"All of 'em," Mugza grunted, throwing his soup bowl at Drook's head. "The emperor can't stop us fighting."

"And what weapons can Podrang use, Drook?"

"He might use the Cockatrice Eggs," the other said doubtfully.

"What are those?"

"They're not really eggs," Gru broke in. "They're magic jewels for wholesale enchantments. Different spells in each one. The green ones, I think, are for turning people into earthworms. Podrang just breaks one, and the spell spreads out for twenty feet or so. The red ones are—let's see. Transforming gnomes into humans—though that's a bit *too* tough. No . . . yes. The blue ones—"

"Into *humans!*" Crockett's eyes widened. "Where are the eggs kept?"

"Let's fight," Mugza offered, and hurled himself bodily on Drook, who squeaked frantically and beat his attacker over the head with his stone soup bowl, which broke. Brockle Buhn added to the excitement by kicking both battlers impartially, till felled by Gru Magru. Within a few moments the room resounded with the excited screams of gnomic battle. Inevitably Crockett was sucked in—

Of all the perverted, incredible forms of life that had ever existed, gnomes were about the oddest. It was impossible to understand their philosophy. Their minds worked along different paths from human intelligences. Self-preservation and survival of the race—these two vital human instincts were lacking in gnomes. They neither died nor propagated. They just worked and fought. Bad-tempered little monsters, Crockett thought irritably. Yet they had existed for—ages. Since the beginning, maybe. Their social organism was the result of evolution far older than man's. It might be well suited to gnomes. Crockett might be throwing an unnecessary monkey wrench in the machinery.

So what? He wasn't going to spend eternity digging anthracite, even though, in retrospect, he remembered feeling a curious thrill of obscure pleasure as he worked. Digging might be fun for gnomes. Certainly it was their *raison d'être*. In time Crockett himself might lose his human affiliations, and be metamorphosed completely into a gnome. What had happened to other humans who had undergone such an—alteration—as he had done? All gnomes looked alike. But maybe Gru Magru had once been human—or Drook—or Brockle Buhn.

They were gnomes now, at any rate, thinking and existing completely as gnomes. And in time he himself would be exactly like them. Already he had acquired the strange tropism that attracted him to metals and repelled him from daylight. But he didn't *like* to dig!

He tried to recall the little he knew about gnomes—miners, metalsmiths, living underground. There was something about the Picts—dwarfish men who hid underground when invaders came to England, centuries ago. That seemed to tie in vaguely with the gnomes' dread of human beings. But the gnomes themselves were certainly not descended from Picts. Very likely the two separate races and species had become identified through occupying the same habitat.

Well, that was no help. What about the emperor? He wasn't, apparently, a gnome with a high I. Q., but he *was* a magician. Those jewels—Cockatrice Eggs—were significant. If he could get hold of the ones that transformed gnomes into men—

But obviously he couldn't, at present. Better wait. Till the strike had been called. The—strike—

Crockett went to sleep.

He was roused—painfully—by Brockle Buhn, who seemed to have adopted him. Very likely it was her curiosity about the matter of a kiss. From time to time she offered to give Crockett one, but he steadfastly refused. In lieu of it, she supplied him with breakfast. At least, he thought grimly, he'd get plenty of iron in his system, even though the rusty chips rather resembled corn flakes. As a special inducement Brockle Buhn sprinkled coal dust over the mess.

Well, no doubt his digestive system had also altered. Crockett wished he could get an X-ray picture of his insides. Then he decided it would be much too disturbing. Better not to know. But he could not help wondering. Gears in his stomach? Small millstones? What would happen if he inadvertently swallowed some emery dust? Maybe he could sabotage the emperor that way.

Perceiving that his thoughts were beginning to veer wildly, Crockett gulped the last of his meal and followed Brockle Buhn to the anthracite tunnel.

"How about the strike? How's it coming?"

"Fine, Grockett," she smiled, and Crockett winced at the sight. "Tonight all the gnomes will meet in the Roaring Cave. Just after work."

THERE WAS no time for more conversation. The overseer appeared, and the gnomes snatched up their

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picks. Dig—dig—dig. It kept up at the same pace. Crockett sweated and toiled. It wouldn't be for long. His mind slipped a cog, so that he relapsed into a waking slumber, his muscles responding automatically to the need. Dig, dig, dig. Sometimes a fight. Once a rest period. Then dig again.

Five centuries later the day ended. It was time to sleep.

But there was something much more important. The union meeting in the Roaring Cave. Brockle Buhn conducted Crockett there, a huge cavern hung with glittering green stalactites. Gnomes came pouring into it. Gnomes and more gnomes. The turnip heads were everywhere. A dozen fights started. Gru Magru, Mugza, and Drook found places near Crockett. During a lull Brockle Buhn urged him to a platform of rock jutting from the floor.

"Now," she whispered. "They all know about it. Tell them what you want."

Crockett was looking out over the bobbing heads, the red and blue garments, all lit by that eerie silver glow. "Fellow gnomes," he began weakly.

"Fellow gnomes!" The words roared out, magnified by the acoustics of the cavern. That bull bellow gave Crockett courage. He plunged on.

"Why should you work twenty hours a day? Why should you be forbidden to eat the anthracite you dig? While Podrang squats in his bath and laughs at you! Fellow gnomes, the emperor is only one—you are many! He can't make you work. How would you like mud soup three times a day? The emperor can't fight you all. If you refuse to work—all of you—he'll have to give in! He'll have to!"

"Tell 'em about the nonfighting edict," Gru Magru called.

Crockett obeyed. That got 'em. Fighting was dear to every gnomic heart. And Crockett kept on talking.

"Podrang will try to back down, you know. He'll pretend he never intended to forbid fighting. That'll show he's afraid of you! We hold the whip hand! We'll strike—and the emperor can't do a damn thing about it. When he runs out of mud for his baths, he'll capitulate soon enough."

"He'll enchant us all," Drook muttered sadly.

"He won't dare! What good would that do? He knows which side his . . . uh . . . which side his mud is buttered on. Podrang is unfair to gnomes! That's our watchword!"

It ended, of course, in a brawl. But Crockett was satisfied. The gnomes would not go to work tomorrow. They would, instead, meet in the Council Chamber, adjoining Podrang's throne room—and sit down.

That night he slept well.

In the morning Crockett went, with Brockle Buhn, to the Council Chamber, a cavern gigantic enough to hold the thousands of gnomes who thronged it. In the silver light their red and blue garments had a curiously elfin quality. Or, perhaps, naturally enough, Crockett thought. Were gnomes, strictly speaking, elves?

Drook came up. "I didn't draw Podrang's mud bath," he confided hoarsely. "Oh, but he'll be furious. Listen to him."

And, indeed, a distant crackling of profanity was coming through an archway in one wall of the cavern.

Mugza and Gru Magru joined them. "He'll be along directly," the latter said. "What a fight there'll be!"

"Let's fight now," Mugza suggested. "I want to kick somebody. Hard."

"There's a gnome who's asleep," Crockett said. "If you sneak up on him, you can land a good one right in his face."

Mugza, drooling slightly, departed on his errand, and simultaneously Podrang II, Emperor of the Dornsef Gnomes, stumped into the cavern. It was the first time Crockett had seen the ruler without a coating of mud, and he could not help gulping at the sight. Podrang was *very* ugly. He combined in himself the most repulsive qualities of every gnome Crockett had previously seen. The result was perfectly indescribable.

"Ah," said Podrang, halting and swaying on his short bow legs. "I have guests. Drook! Where in the name of the nine steaming hells is my bath?" But Drook had ducked from sight.

The emperor nodded. "I see. Well, I won't lose my temper. *I won't lose my temper! I WON'T—"*

He paused as a stalactite was dislodged from the roof and crashed down. In the momentary silence, Crockett stepped forward, cringing slightly.

"W-we're on strike," he announced. "It's a sit-down strike. We won't work till—"

"Yaaah!" screamed the infuriated emperor. "You won't work, eh? Why, you boggle-eyed, flap-tongued, drag-bellied offspring of unmentionable algae! You seething little leprous blotch of bat-nibbled fungus! You cringing parasite on the underside of a dwarfish and ignoble worm! *Yaaah!"*

"Fight!" the irrepressible Mugza yelled, and flung himself on Podrang, only to be felled by a well-placed foul blow.

Crockett's throat felt dry. He raised his voice, trying to keep it steady.

"Your majesty! If you'll just wait a minute—"

"You mushroom-nosed spawn of degenerate black bats," the enraged emperor shrieked at the top of his voice. "I'll enchant you all! I'll turn you into naiads! Strike, will you! Stop me from having my mud bath, will you? By Kronos, Nid, Ymir, and Loki, you'll have cause to regret this! *Yaaah!"* he finished, inarticulate with fury.

"Quick!" Crockett whispered to Gru and Brockle Buhn. "Get between him and the door, so he can't get hold of the Cockatrice Eggs."

"They're not in the throne room," Gru Magru explained unhelpfully. "Podrang just grabs them out of the air."

"Oh!" the harassed Crockett groaned. At that strategic moment Brockle Buhn's worst instincts overcame her. With a loud shriek of delight she knocked Crock-

ett down, kicked him twice, and sprang for the emperor.

She got in one good blow before Podrang hammered her atop the head with one gnarled fist, and instantly her turnip-shaped skull seemed to prolapse into her torso. The emperor, a bright purple with fury, reached out—and a yellow crystal appeared in his hand.

It was one of the Cockatrice Eggs.

BELLOWING like a *musth* elephant, Podrang hurled it. A circle of twenty feet was instantly cleared among the massed gnomes. But it wasn't vacant. Dozens of bats rose and fluttered about, adding to the confusion.

Confusion became chaos. With yells of delighted fury, the gnomes rolled forward toward their ruler. "Fight!" the cry thundered out, reverberating from the roof. *"Fight!"*

Podrang snatched another crystal from nothingness—a green one, this time. Thirty-seven gnomes were instantly transformed into earthworms, and were trampled. The emperor went down under an avalanche of attackers, who abruptly disappeared, turned into mice by another of the Cockatrice Eggs.

Crockett saw one of the crystals sailing toward him, and ran like hell. He found a hiding-place behind a stalagmite, and from there watched the carnage. It was definitely a sight worth seeing, though it could not be recommended to a nervous man.

The Cockatrice Eggs exploded in an incessant stream. Whenever that happened, the spell spread out for twenty feet or more before losing its efficacy. Those caught on the fringes of the circle were only partially transformed. Crockett saw one gnome with a mole's head. Another was a worm from the waist down. Another was—*ulp!* Some of the spell-patterns were not, apparently, drawn even from known mythology.

The fury of noise that filled the cavern brought stalactites crashing down incessantly from the roof. Ever so often Podrang's battered head would reappear, only to go down again as more gnomes sprang to the attack—to be enchanted. Mice, moles, bats, and other things filled the Council Chamber. Crockett shut his eyes and prayed.

He opened them in time to see Podrang snatch a red crystal out of the air, pause, and then deposit it gently behind him. A purple Cockatrice Egg came next. This crashed against the floor, and thirty gnomes turned into tree toads.

Apparently only Podrang was immune to his own magic. The thousands who had filled the cavern were rapidly thinning, for the Cockatrice Eggs seemed to come from an inexhaustible source of supply. How long would it be before Crockett's own turn came? He couldn't hide here forever.

His gaze riveted to the red crystal Podrang had so carefully put down. He was remembering something—the Cockatrice Egg that would transform gnomes into humans. Of course! Podrang wouldn't use *that,* since the very sight of men was so distressing to gnomes. If Crockett could get his hands on that red crystal—

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ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

He tried it, sneaking through the confusion, sticking close to the wall of the cavern, till he neared Podrang. The emperor was swept away by another onrush of gnomes, who abruptly changed into dormice, and Crockett got the red jewel. It felt abnormally cold.

He almost broke it at his feet before a thought stopped and chilled him. He was far under Dornsef Mountain, in a labyrinth of caverns. No human could find his way out. But a gnome could, with the aid of his strange tropism to daylight.

A bat flew against Crockett's face. He was almost certain it squeaked, "What a fight!" in a parody of Brockle Buhn's voice, but he couldn't be sure. He cast one glance over the cavern before turning to flee.

It was a complete and utter chaos. Bats, moles, worms, ducks, eels, and a dozen other species crawled, flew, ran, bit, shrieked, snarled, grunted, whooped, and croaked all over the place. From all directions the remaining gnomes—only about a thousand now—were converging on a surging mound of gnomes that marked where the emperor was. As Crockett stared the mound dissolved, and a number of gecko lizards fled to safety.

"Strike, will you!" Podrang bellowed. *"I'll show you!"*

Crockett turned and fled. The throne room was deserted, and he ducked into the first tunnel. There, he concentrated on thinking of daylight. His left ear felt compressed. He sped on till he saw a side passage on the left, slanting up, and turned into it at top speed. The muffled noise of combat died behind him.

He clutched the red Cockatrice Egg tightly. What had gone wrong? Podrang should have stopped to parley. Only—only he hadn't. A singularly bad-tempered and short-sighted gnome. He probably wouldn't stop till he'd depopulated his entire kingdom. At the thought Crockett hurried along faster.

The tropism guided him. Sometimes he took the wrong tunnel, but always, whenever he thought of daylight, he would *feel* the nearest daylight pressing against him. His short, bowed legs were surprisingly hardy.

Then he heard someone running after him.

He didn't turn. The sizzling blast of profanity that curled his ears told him the identity of the pursuer. Podrang had no doubt cleared the Council Chamber, to the last gnome, and was now intending to tear Crockett apart pinch by pinch. That was only one of the things he promised.

Crockett ran. He shot along that tunnel like a bullet. The tropism guided him, but he was terrified lest he reach a dead end. The clamor from behind grew louder. If Crockett hadn't known better, he would have imagined that an army of gnomes pursued him.

Faster! Faster! But now Podrang was in sight. His roars shook the very walls. Crockett sprinted, rounded a corner, and saw a wall of flaming light—a circle of it, in the distance. It was daylight, as it appeared to gnomic eyes.

He could not reach it in time. Podrang was too close. A few more seconds, and those gnarled, terrible hands would close on Crockett's throat.

Then Crockett remembered the Cockatrice Egg. If he transformed himself into a man now, Podrang would not dare touch him. And he was almost at the tunnel's mouth.

He stopped, whirling, and lifted the jewel. Simultaneously the emperor, seeing his intention, reached out with both hands, and snatched six or seven of the crystals out of the air. He threw them directly at Crockett, a fusillade of rainbow colors.

But Crockett had already slammed the red gem down on the rock at his feet. There was an ear-splitting crash. Jewels seemed to burst all around Crockett—but the red one had been broken first.

The roof fell in.

A short while later, Crockett dragged himself painfully from the debris. A glance showed him that the way to the outer world was still open. And—thank Heaven!—daylight looked normal again, not that flaming blaze of eye-searing white.

He looked toward the depths of the tunnel, and froze. Podrang was emerging, with some difficulty, from a mound of rubble. His low curses had lost none of their fire.

Crockett turned to run, stumbled over a rock, and fell flat. As he sprang up, he saw that Podrang had seen him.

The gnome stood transfixed for a moment. Then he yelled, spun on his heel, and fled into the darkness. He was gone. The sound of his rapid footfalls died.

Crockett swallowed with difficulty. *Gnomes are afraid of men—whew!* That had been a close squeak. But now—

He was more relieved than he had thought. Subconsciously he must have been wondering whether the spell would work, since Podrang had flung six or seven Cockatrice Eggs at him. But he had smashed the red one first. Even the strange, silvery gnomelight was gone. The depths of the cave were utterly black—and silent.

Crockett headed for the entrance. He pulled himself out, luxuriating in the warmth of the afternoon sun. He was near the foot of Dornsef Mountain, in a patch of brambles. A hundred feet away a farmer was plowing one terrace of a field.

Crockett stumbled toward him. As he approached, the man turned.

He stood transfixed for a moment. Then he yelled, spun on his heel, and fled.

His shrieks drifted back up the mountain as Crockett, remembering the Cockatrice Eggs, forced himself to look down at his own body.

Then he screamed, too. But the sound was not one that could ever have emerged from a human throat.

Still, that was natural enough—under the circumstances—

THE END.

ON BOOKS OF MAGIC

THE BOOK OF SACRED MAGIC OF ABRAMELIN THE MAGE

By Comte de L'Avro

WHY is it that books on genuine magic or theurgy are so hard to discover? It is because of numerous small editions, private publications, and the binding oaths of secrecy taken by magicions. Despite these limitations, it is possible for the bibliophile to be communicable at times regarding works on magic.

One of the most extraordinary works of all time on genuine magic is "The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage." The original handwritten manuscript of this work is in the archives of the Bibliotheque de l'Arsenal, Paris. The contents are written in medieval French but were translated from Hebrew, which, in turn, was received from an Egyptian. S. L. McGregor Mathers, a personage of great learning in magical and occult studies, translated this old French manuscript into English (1883). Mathers mentions in the introduction (page XVI) of his work that Bulwer Lytton knew of and had access to this curious cabalistic and magical manuscript in Paris. He says that Lytton's books, "Zanoni" and "The Strange Story," famous novels on magic, have chapters that are identical with the directions given in "The Book of Sacred Magic." It resembles not at all the offensive so-called grimoires or magical conjuring books. It is written in a simple yet exalted style which makes for a very good understanding of its magical formulae. There are no intricate or impossible directions to follow or paraphernalia to obtain.

The two original Egyptian documents of Abramelin have had another section added to them, making three in all. This additional section or the first part consists of the experiences and travels of one known as Abraham the Jew. This Abraham the Jew, after years of travel in search of wisdom and riches, returned to Europe with Abramelin's Egyptian document, where he won great fame as a magician. History reports that such a strange character, around 1400, actually did perform marvelous acts of magic before the rich and the nobility such as the Emperor of Germany, King Henry VI of England, Pope John XXIII, and the Duke of Bavaria. This colorful personage also possessed vast wealth which he claimed to have received by magical processes. He also saved the day by invoking twenty thousand strange soldiers—who appeared real enough—from the shadow world for the German ruler, Frederick I, who was waging a losing battle near Brux in 1425. Then, too, he was able to go among people apparently invisible. These and many other almost unbelievable deeds he performed.

Parts Two and Three give the method, directions and instructions whereby the phenomena may be produced.

In this second division or Part Two the aspirant must go into a six months' retreat according to certain directions, or at least live in the country where he will be able to be alone most of the time for six months. His residence in the country must have a small room which can be converted into a sanctum. This sanctum is to be furnished primarily with a small triangular altar, a censer and an oil lamp which is to burn only olive oil. Even the incense is specified as being four parts of Olibanum, two parts of Storax, and one part of Lignum-aloes.

No living animal or person is to have access to this sanctum but the student. The seeker for strange powers performs various disciplines in this six-month period by a gradual intensification of his actions every two months.

The second period of two months finds the candidate spending more time in his sanctum and less time outside, until by the last two months he is "inflamed" with invocations. It is during this time that most aspirants become discouraged and a thousand and one seductions attempt to lure him from completing the course he has chosen. If he persists, the "Dark Night of the Soul" will gradually pass and then a new and marvelous "Dawn" of consciousness will be the result. Finally the last period culminates in an elaborate ceremony wherein the candidate invokes his Guardian Angel, Adonai, or Higher Self.

If he is successful and is able to invoke his guardian angel at will, he becomes possessed with the powers of an Adept. Such powers imply control over the principalities and powers of the shadow world as well as of the hidden forces in nature.

The third division of this great book of sacred magic gives the principal manner or agency through which the Adept exercises his super human powers. Certain magic squares based upon the names of planetary spirits, angels and other powers are used as focal points for potent forces. The invocation of the Adept magician, because of his conscious control of the powerful guardian angel, magnetizes each square according to the name represented. This magnetized focal point causes the actual power to perform the deeds he is qualified to do.

It is the writer's conclusion that genuine magic is a very ancient and universal art. If it were always and in every respect charlatanry as the skeptic would have us believe, it would have been thrown on the rubbish heap and forgotten by disillusioned humanity long ages past.

ORVAL GRAVES.

THE DOLPHIN'S DOUBLOONS

By Silaki Ali Hassan

● The dolphin was stranded in a tidal pool, 'till a little Cockney sailor, stranded in a foreign port, rescued it. And the dolphin showed a strange gratitude—

Illustrated by Schneeman

"NEVER moind where I gawt it!" Cork sneered. "Hi might 'ave got it from a fish. There's a bloody hounce o' gold in each—hin *it!*—an' gol' is wuth thirty-foive Yank dollars to the hounce. Do Hi get me foive pound fer the blinkin' coin, or don't I?"

Leer, the pawnbroker, stared at the yellow disk. It was about the size of a fifty-cent piece, possibly twice as thick and three times as heavy. The head of a damsel profiled its face across one side amidst a tangle of fine mold and discolor; the other side bore a date, 1667, and some coarse lettering. It was obviously of Spanish or French origin, judging from the characteristics of the print.

Cork was sopped—inwardly with canned heat and rotten rum, and outwardly with briny sea water. His wringing dungs were bedraggled and filthy, his shoes, torn and weathered at the toes. A coarse turtle-neck sweater, sagging and misfitted, clung to him like seaweed to a rotting hull. And from bald spot to the portholes in his shoes, he was crummy with sand and flakes of salt.

Leer tested the coin for its gold content, leering suspiciously at Cork all the while. Cork grunted impatiently and waited.

"I'll give you a fin for it," the broker decided at length.

Cork exploded like the impact of a blue shark tiffing with a whale. "Gimme thet blarsted thing!" he howled, reaching over the counter for it. "A fin—*one quid*—ye say! See ye teh 'ell before Hi gi' ye the doubloon fer a measly pound!"

"Wait a minute," Leer bartered oilily, drawing back out of Cork's reach. "How much do you want for it?"

"Foive quid!" Cork shrilled. "Twenty-foive o' yer Yank dollars—an' hit's wuth ten!"

"All right. All right," the broker agreed, fetching a coin book and thumbing the pages. "How many more of them do you have?"

Cork grinned shrewdly and followed the broker to a grille. "So Hi'm fetchin' a little hinterest," he observed. "Maybe we can do a little trafficking; but cross this scurvy palm o' mine, fust. Five poun' sterling, right here"—and he pointed to a callus. "Right here."

Leer ignored him while he scanned a couple of pages of the

catalogue, and then stepped abruptly to a drawer and shoved twenty-five dollars through the cage window into Cork's hand.

"Now," he suggested smoothly, "how many of them did you say you had?"

Cork snatched the money, counted it and slipped it into his pocket. "Hi didn't say!" he snapped, turning to the door. "But hif Hi decide different, Hi'll call ag'in—"

FRISCO's Embarcadero wharfs a dozen hock shops to the block, each lined on both sides by rum cellars and cheap chop and chow houses. Cork ignored the latter but wabbled his way into another pawn joint and bought a large money belt.

A few minutes later he was worming his way through the marine gear and discarded lifeboats of an abandoned lot. Concealed from passers-by, he unhitched his breeches, pulled up the rim of his sweater and fastened the belt around his middle. Handful after handful of the golden coins went into the money bag, fairly filling it and a few moments later, bulging noticeably at the waist, he was staggering through the debris and back to the street singing:

"With a yo-'eave-ho an' ha fare-you-well,
And a sudden plunge in the sullen swell,
Ten fathoms deep on the road to 'ell—
Yo-ho-ho an' a bottle o' rum."

The tide had turned and he was still singing the same song five hours later. Another hour, another bottle of rum and he was drooling himself an encore, walking, stumbling, lumbering along like a tightrope walker, looking for a taxi. And he found one.

"Out to the beash," he ordered—and made as if to clamber aboard.

"Wait a minute," the cabby growled, grabbing him by the seat of the trousers and pulling him back into the street. "Have you got any dough?"

"Enough to buy you an' ye'r bloody jitney!" Cork slobbered. "I shaid, out to the beash—"

IT WAS DAWN when Cork awoke. The Pacific's icy brine was lapping at his sweater and Frisco's biting wind was snapping at his chest. He was lying on his side in ankle-deep water, his head throbbing in rhythm with the swells that lapped through a V-shaped aperture in front of him and a schooner beam away. He could see the open sea through the crevice, the sloping beach of the tiny lagoon, the cloudy sky off to port—

Cork fell into a fit of coughing and put a hand to his head, rubbing it sharply as if the motion would lessen the awful pain. There was a terrible taste in his mouth and his tongue felt as hard as stone—and scaly—so that it hurt him when he tried to dampen his lips. His hand came away covered with coagulated blood and he stared at it dumbly as if it were someone else's hand, someone else's blood. Still half within his drunken stupor, he tried to rise, grunting at the horrible pains that shot through him from his rheumatic joints.

The action served to turn him more to one side, press him harder against something that was soft and warm. He was suddenly conscious that although his chest was half frozen from exposure, his back felt comfortably warm, and he forced his eyes open a second time in order to see what the obstruction was.

Cork was lying flush against the belly and side of a huge dolphin.

"Davey!" Cork croaked, turning completely over. "'Ow did *you* get here—in a dutty pub—" And he stopped short as the realization came to him suddenly that he was in no pub; that he was in the selfsame lagoon where he had originally met Davey, the dolphin.

"'Ow?" he hacked in a spasm, trying vainly to get to his feet and abandoning the idea. "'Ow did *Hi* get—"

The dolphin thrashed its way through the six-inch water, half prodding, half wriggling over the sandy bed to halt abruptly flush against Cork. Cork watched stupidly, fighting to remember, while the dolphin alternately thrust its blunt snout into the water and out.

Memory came back to him with a crash of bells. Someone had waylaid him! Someone had struck him with a club and thrown him into the lagoon for dead!

He felt the gash on his forehead and pried about with his finger. He could feel his skull through the lips of the rent.

"Blimey!" he muttered. "Another hinch an' they'd a-scuttled ol' Cork. But I guess Hi was a willow too sturdy fer thim—the bloody blokes! But they could'n' 'a' guessed ol' Cork's crow's nest's made o' ironwood—"

His fingers flitted to the money belt. It was there and intact. A painful search of his pockets netted him tupn'ce and his old jackknife. He replaced these and turned his attention to Davey, the dolphin.

"Ye found me ag'in, ye owld sea cow," he coughed affectionately.

Cork's bloodshot eyes labored their way about and took in the surroundings. "Ye should 'ave known better than to come back up into the slough," he scowled. "Hif it 'adn't been for me the last time I blundered haroun' 'ere, ye'd 'a' dried up dead in this blasted 'ole! So I 'elped ye back into the sea because all the fishes are my frien's. And last night, whin thim dastard buggers rammed me fo'c's'le with a marlin spike, ye stayed aboard an' warded off the sharks—bless ye, Davey!" and Cork gave the dolphin an affectionate pat.

Cork went into another spasm and managed a croaking laugh. "'Elp me to my feet, ye playful idjut!" he suggested. "I'll see wot's to be done. The slough'll dry before long an' I've got to get ye out before the tide fetches full offshore."

He strained to a sitting position and braced himself against the smooth back of the dolphin, managing thusly to gain his feet. He reeled dizzily about for a moment and then finally stood erect.

Surveying the scene, he motioned cliffward. "Get yerself off into the deeper water," he ordered, "an' Hi'll sail on up to the beach. Flip yerself out on the sand, hand I'll try an' roll ye o'er the hump. Blimey if I know whether I'm poop-brained or not, an' if I wake an' find Hi'm 'aving D. T. from the rotten rum I've drunk, I'll swear I'll never

touch a briny drop until I die. Up anchor—" And he reeled off toward the tiny beach ahead.

He passed the spot where the water poured back into the ocean through the V-shaped gap—by far too narrow now for the passage of the bulky-bodied dolphin—and managed to gain the beach after falling a time or two. The fish gained the deeper water near the rocky exit and waited. When Cork reached the spot he had spoken of, Davey backed as far into the deeper water as she could. There was a sudden turmoil of wildly-thrashing fins and tail—and she shot through the surface with the speed of a hurricane, to land with a *squish*, at Cork's feet.

Davey had cleared fifteen feet of damp sand in the leap, and Cork bent his aching back to rolling the dolphin up the incline.

" 'Oo'd of thought that Cork," the sailor grunted, pushing with all his might, "would get blarnied on canned 'eat an' get to actin' nursemaid to a fish!" He stopped for a few minutes to catch his breath. Davey was covered with sand from snout to tail and lay still, panting fully as hard and twice as loudly as Cork himself. "And 'oo'd of thought the blessed fish'd show her love in such a blessed way!" with which he bent to rolling, jostling, pushing the thrashing dolphin toward the top of the incline. "Blast ye, Davey! Ye must weigh all of forty stone—han' than hisn't no sardine!"

Cork gave the fish a final nudge with his foot, and Davey slid down the steep incline and into the sea with no further help.

The dolphin had scarcely touched the water than it was gone like a flash. It shortly appeared offshore, thrashing and flailing about in apparent glee. Cork watched for a moment or two, nauseated by the effort he had made, saw the sky and sea change places, felt the beach—surf and all—overturn and crash into his face and then plunged down the incline, unconscious.

He awoke with a burning pain in his chest—a pain that stabbed deeper with each breath. The air felt icy and the sand and rocks beneath rasped and irritated him wherever they touched. He felt of his forehead and drew his hand away abruptly.

"Got a fever," he mumbled weakly. "Looks much like they scuttled ol' Cork after all. Hi'll have to get down to some Godforsaken pub an' get myself a drink o' rum"—with which he managed to rise and stagger along the shore. But the fever limited his stride and he hadn't gone but a cable length or so before he dropped in his tracks, too weary to move.

He was on fire from head to foot. His head beat a tattoo with the breakers and his joints had frozen to the spot. The weight of the doubloons in his belt was growing greater and greater all the time. He doubted that he'd scrape the strength to lift them from the ground again.

"Three thousand leagues from a home port," he grumbled half aloud, "and with a cargo in my money belt—hand Hi 'aven't strength enough to walk one league to get a drink o' rum—" and he fell to laughter. "An' 'oo'd believe me hif I told them that a fish'd given me that gold from gratitude!"

There was a swirling splash, and Cork, not bothering to look around, saw a huge gray body plunge into view to land with a scraping *squish* at his feet.

"Ahoy, matey!" Cork gasped, fighting back the pain in his chest. "Ye back; an' where—"

He stopped short as the dolphin retched—and spewed the sand about with golden doubloons!

It was the second time Cork had witnessed the phenomenon. It stupefied him as much as did the first and it was some seconds before he could bring it on himself to laugh. "Ye didn't 'ave to pay again," he croaked, pressing a gnarled fist to his chest. "I'm loaded down as it is an' you've shown your gratitude enough." He reached out and picked up one of the coins. "Just like the others; ye must 'ave a chest of thim somewhere. Maybe a galley sunk some time ago—"

"Moses!" oathed Leer as Cork staggered through the door a few minutes before closing time, reeling, plunging from one showcase to another. "What's happened to you?" and he hurried around a luggage display to take Cork by the arm.

Cork jerked away and struggled to a chair. "I'm stout enough to 'andle me own seas," he grated as he fell into it. "A bottle o' bloody rum; Hi'll gi'e ye a cursed doubloon fer hit—"

"It's a deal!" Leer snapped, starting for the door. "Be back in a jiffy—"

Cork stared glumly until the broker had vanished beyond the plate-glass window, and then fumbled with his sweater. The money belt was obstinate and Leer had reappeared, bottle in hand, just as Cork was replacing the woolen rim. Cork sighted the bottle and sucked in his breath, half rising, half reaching.

"The gold piece," Leer demanded, his arm outstretched.

Cork threw it at him and snatched the bottle out of his hands, sprawling to the floor as he did so. His fingers fumbled with the seal, and failing to unfasten it, he brought the neck of the bottle down on the edge of a nearby spittoon, shattering it. The jagged edges shot to his lips and he drank, a trickle of the stuff making its way down over his chin and into his already soggy sweater.

The broker was examining the gold piece and satisfied that it was identical to the first, lowered his jeweler's glass and came back around the counter.

"Take it easy, old fella," he advised. "Broken glass will kill you—"

Cork lowered the bottle, coughed and sputtered once or twice and raised it again. "Hi've taken o' me rum from jagged necks before," he grumbled as he lowered the bottle the second time. "Hit's clothes that I'll be needin'; warm ones—"

"Worse than that," Leer grinned. "You look to be pretty well busted up. Better come on back into the back room and let me take a look at that cut in your head—"

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Cork eyed him closely for the first time. The broker was a full hand shorter than Cork, and weighed, perhaps, two thirds as much. In spite of the fact that his image persisted in galavanting about like a scow on the open sea, Cork could see that the broker was an old man. His features were gaunt and wrinkled, his hands, long-nailed and thin. There was a certain something about him that even low-grade Jamaica rum could not obliterate—a something that suggested the name Leer, although Cork had never seen the man before in his life.

"Maybe ye're right," the sailor mumbled, taking another drink. "Ye couldn't be up to mischief with a hull as sturdy as an heggshell—"

Ignoring the offer of aid from the broker, he managed to stagger into a small rear office. Leer snapped on a desk light and pushed a chair within Cork's range.

"I'm your friend," he offered. "You're sick. Maybe you'd better let me call an ambulance and get you to a hospital—"

Cork stared blankly at the floor. It was rising and falling like the swells in a sheltered cove. Somewhere in the distance, a ship's bell sounded. Vaguely, he tried to count the strokes, mumbled, "I told ye I can sail the straits meself"—wobbled a degree or two—"Take the watch, matey"—and crumpled to the floor.

Cork knew nothing for a fortnight and when he opened his eyes again, the walls and ceiling were pitching in unison with the familiar sounds of a surf and groaning timbers. In perfect contentment, he dozed away, his faculties drifting off into a total blank. The second time he regained consciousness, the seas had calmed somewhat and the booming of the surf had receded.

The third time he came to with a roar: "I'm shanghaied!" he bellowed—struggling weakly to rise. "The bloody dogs 'ave shipped me!"

There was a commotion at the doorway and a nurse entered the room. Cork stared at her stupidly as she pressed him back beneath the covers. "No such thing," she smiled. "You're safe ashore and getting well—and the most important thing right now is for you to stay tucked in. If you do, you'll be back on your ship inside of a week."

Things were difficult for Cork to understand and he intuitively pushed her hands away and felt of his head. It was swathed in bandages from forehead to nape. The walls and ceiling had stopped their pitching and even the chandelier was motionless. There was an odor of medicine in the air, thrice as offensive because of its antonymous relationship to the smell of rum or salt water.

He closed his eyes for what seemed an instant, and when he had reopened them, Leer was at the bedside, trying to look as pleasant as possible.

"Shylock!" Cork croaked disgustedly.

Leer's face took on an expression of dissatisfaction. "That doesn't sound very much like gratitude," he grumbled, motioning the nurse to leave, "especially since I've brought you into my home, saved your life and spent a small fortune in bringing you out of it. You had pneumonia. I don't know what you call it on shipboard, but here on land, it's figured pretty good for a kill."

"Ye didn't do it from philanthropy, Hi'll bet a can o' heat," Cork croaked back; "ye're a ball-shop broker, hand they're—"

"Never mind that," Leer snorted. "I guess maybe I was wrong. But wrong or not, I've been up with you almost every night for two weeks, and paying a nurse good money during days—not counting doctor bills and such. The least you can do is keep your salty trap shut!" with which he wheeled about and left the room.

Cork's mind was too muddled to try and think it out so he let it go at that. A doctor visited him later in the day, and still later, he had something to eat. At seven in the evening, the nurse tucked him in and left, and at eight, Cork was fast asleep.

The sound of the door opening awoke him. It was Leer, the same businesslike grin on his face; the same shrewd look he had displayed during the bartering of the gold pieces.

The realization struck Cork like the weather side of a tidal wave. He had forgotten something, but that look was enough to remind him and he clawed his way upward to a sitting position in the bed.

"My doubloons!" he shrilled. "My golden doubloons—"

Leer stepped to the bedside and tried to push him back beneath the covers. Cork's face crimsoned and he collapsed weakly.

"My doubloo—"

"Shut up, you old—" Leer snarled. "I'll give you back your lousy belt—"

"I knew it!" Cork roared. "You blasted bugger! You . . . you—I'll bust ye're bulkheads! I'll splinter ye're hull!"

He made a wild motion as if to grasp hold of the broker, shrieking and gasping all the while. Leer retreated through the door and appeared a moment later bearing the money belt. He tossed it roughly into Cork's lap where it struck with a painful thump.

Cork was mute, dumfounded. His fingers fumbled with the fastenings and he poured the doubloons out. They had not been touched, seaweed, sand and all.

"Count them," Leer snarled. "Every last one of them is there, you stinking tar!"

Cork stared, stupefied. "A blinkin' loan broker with a heart," he mumbled dazedly. "Hit don't add to two and two."

Leer exuded a sickly grin and motioned to a cabinet. "Glad you're satisfied," he grunted. "Let's have a drink of rum."

"Rum!" echoed Cork, forgetting doubloons and all. "And Jamaica, too—" he croaked, eying the bottle as Leer unsealed it.

Leer pushed it to him. "One drink," he ordered, "and you shouldn't have that."

Cork took the bottle, eying it doubtfully. "I hain't wrong as a rule," he grumbled guiltily, his dry

lips suddenly beginning to drool. "But Hi guess Hi—" The bottle went up into the air and stayed there until Leer snatched it away.

"That's enough," he snapped. "Too much will kill you in the shape you're in. Now let's be friends—and I'll guarantee you that you'll get enough rum to float a schooner in. Tell me"—and he leaned forward just a trifle—"about Davey."

Cork was still feeling the fire in his throat and stomach and was of no mind to listen as long as the bottle of rum was within range. But the mention of Davey brought his head up with a snap.

"Where in 'ell did ye find that out?" he grunted amazedly, scooping the doubloons back into the belt and fastening it about his middle.

"You talked while you were delirious," Leer replied.

"An hif I told ye, ye'd laugh me out o' port," Cork rejoined.

"Never mind that," Leer snapped impatiently. "Who is he?"

"'Oo is 'e!" Cork laughed. "Davey's my little dol—" He stopped abruptly, eying the bottle of rum. "Say," he sneered, hiccuping, "ye hain't no blasted fool after all! Ye're takin' a chance to lose this bloomin' belt o' gold to findin' Davey an' getting the hull of it!" He smacked his lips and nodded to the bottle. "Gimme a drink—"

The broker handed the bottle to him. Cork fetched it to the middle before Leer could retrieve it the second time.

"I've spent money on you," Leer said quietly, his eyes narrowing. "The least you can do is cut me in. I don't want the stuff in that belt. But tell me where Davey is—"

"An' what if I don't," Cork chuckled, already feeling the effects of the liquor on his weakened frame.

Leer pointed at the windows. "I'll strip you down, naked, lock you in, and break open the windows. In the morning you'll be dead—and I'll have the belt!"

The doubloons suddenly felt like ice around Cork's middle. He felt a sudden pain in his chest and he gasped involuntarily. Instinctively, he knew that what Leer had said was as accurate as the keel on a sloop.

"An' you'll 'ang for it, you cursed dastard," he half whispered. "You'll 'ang from the gallows like the cursed coward that ye be—"

"No," sneered Leer. "I'm the man who paid to save your life. It would be no fault of mine if you woke in your delirium and opened those windows. I have been making every effort to save your life—not to kill you. And no one knows about the belt excepting you and me."

Cork did not reply for some time. Instead, he kept his eye on the bottle and finally motioned to it. "Hi'll take the bottle," he muttered, "an' think it over whilst I take a snift or two—"

"No!" Leer snapped. "A quart of rum would kill you. You haven't eaten for two weeks."

"Then what do ye want, you scurvy ship rat!" Cork shrieked suddenly, trembling from stem to stern from the effort. "I told ye that ye'd never believe me if I told you who Davey was!"

"Who is he—and *where* is he?"

"A fish!" snarled Cork. "That's 'oo 'e is! A bloomin' fish!"

Leer arose deliberately. "So you think I'm fooling," he sneered. "Maybe this will change your mind"—and he leaped to the foot of the bed and grasped hold of the sheets. Before Cork could raise a hand to stop him, he had ripped the covers away and tossed them into the corner. "Now," he whispered, "will you talk—or do I open the windows?"

Cork, naked except for a thin nightshirt, shivered atop the bed for a moment before he spoke.

"Ye saved my life," he bartered shrewdly, "an' Hi'm a blasted fool for being so unreasonable. But true it is; there hain't no more but what's in this here belt. I'm not snashing—"

"You're a liar!" Leer echoed, sensing that Cork was weakening. "The coins in that belt are part of a shipment made by the queen of Spain to her colonies here on the coast in 1667. One entire mintage of them went down with the galley on the Faralones one night in a storm just outside the Golden Gate.

From what you said in your tantrums while I was fighting to keep you alive, there isn't but two of you in on the take—and Davey's the only one that guards the stuff. Take me to it and I'll split three ways with you guys. Don't, and Davey gets all that's out there, I get what you have in the belt—and you get a pine box!

Cork was stupefied. He pressed back on the bed, this time ignoring the bottle and eying the covers lying in the corner. It was much chillier than it had been with the covers over him and he imagined that he felt a stab—a faint one—somewhere in his chest.

"All right," he decided. "I guess you know too much about hit. Fetch the covers—an' let me 'ave a wee nip. Hi'll draw ye a map han' gi'e ye a note to Davey—"

"No," said Leer. "I've got a better idea than that; we'll *both* go and *see* Davey."

"But I've got pneumonia!" Cork pleaded. "Hit'll be the death o' me, sure—"

"No it won't," the broker grinned. "My car's good and warm, and if you're careful, you'll be all right."

"We need a boat—"

"I've *got* a boat!" Leer snapped impatiently.

"Hall right," Cork agreed, grasping at every shred of flotsam he could concoct. "We'll leave bright an' early in the mornin'—"

Leer laughed. "We're going *now*," he said.

A sudden terror took Cork. His mind fought wildly for a channel out of the froth—but he was too bewildered and weak to figure anything other than to feign a breakdown—and he tried that by stiffening out and lying still.

He heard Leer laugh, heard the windows open and felt the blast of icy air. The ceiling trembled before his eyes, the walls undulated and threatened to crush him—and he conceded.

"All right," he moaned, desperately. "For now, ye're the bigger frigate—"

"I thought you'd come around to my way of thinking," Leer rasped exultantly, closing the windows. "I'll get you some clothes. Don't try anything funny or you're a feathered tar."

Cork lay still, shivering with an ague that he knew spelled finish to him. But there was no alternative; Leer, small as he was, could do as he chose with Cork in his weakened condition.

Frantically, he wondered what the effects of a trip into the night would incur. And the chase was useless. Davey was a fish, and there was no hide-out with a chest of gold waiting. It was inane; there was no sense in leaving the place.

Whether it was from the effect of the liquor he had taken earlier, or from the momentary blast of chilly air that had struck him when the broker had opened the windows, he did not know, but Cork's forehead was afire. That fire was a prelude to death.

"We wrapped him up in a mains'l tight,
With twice ten turns of a hawser's bight
And heaved him overboard and out of sight—"

Cork shuddered as the familiar verse came to his mind. And he shuddered again as Leer entered the room bearing a bundle of clothing. There was a happy tingle to the perpetual sneer that creased his nose.

"Here's enough clothes to melt an Eskimo," he grinned. "If you're careful, you won't feel any the worse when we get back."

"Ye're crazy as a Welsh mule," Cork murmured. "Why don't ye listen to me? Why—"

Leer tossed the bundle to the bed. "Put them on," was all he said.

"Davey's a fish!" Cork shrilled. "Ye can't talk greed to a fish—"

Leer purpled and sprang forward, his bony fingers clutching Cork's nightgown at the throat. "Once and for all," he snarled, "are you going to take me to the cache?"

"Yes!" Cork exploded into the broker's face. "Hi'll take ye to where Hi gawt the bloody doubloons! Hi'll take ye there an' 'ope to see ye rot han' bury hin thim up to ye'r scurvied neck, ye dastardly pirate!"

Leer pushed him back into bed. "That's better," he grated. "Let's get going—"

The cold blast of air struck Cork in the small slit that weathered his eyes. He was swathed from head to foot, but the wind pierced the two short topcoats, the sweater, the muffler; slashed its way into his hide. He leaned heavier on Leer's shoulder, wondering vaguely whether Leer was armed—and if so, where.

Each few steps would bring dazzling lights out of the darkness—lights that looked like a mental fireworks display more than they did anything. And with each breath, that dread stab in his lungs. Aside from the occasional bite of wind that penetrated his clothes, the fever persisted, gained headway as the minutes went by.

"I'll never make it," he choked in a half whisper. "My fever's gettin' wuss han' I'm ready to turn my beam ends up—"

Leer's grip about the sailor's waist and wrist tightened. A minute more and they had traversed the short distance over a pier to a boathouse and Leer was pushing Cork into the front cockpit of a low-hulled speedboat.

"Now," the broker growled as Cork collapsed into the cushioned seat, "don't try anything funny." His hand flitted to an inside pocket and he drew an automatic and placed it alongside the controls opposite the sailor. "Which one of the Faralones is Davey hiding on?"

Cork grimaced and clenched his teeth, peering blearily through the folds of the muffler and half laughing to himself. Aside from Leer's query, Cork knew that the broker harbored no ideas of bringing Cork back to shore alive. Likewise, it was perfectly obvious that Leer had no intentions of splitting the fictitious loot with anyone but himself.

"The south island," Cork parried, glumly praying for an opening. "Bad reefs on the way into the cove. Better let me take the 'elm whin we get there—"

Leer pressed the starter button and the engine started with a roar. He idled it a moment before he replied.

"I'll do all the piloting," he decided suspiciously, as the boat shot away from the pier and nosed out into the main channel and on into the bay.

The landing lights vanished to the rear and the craft bounced from swell to swell at a pace Cork had never traveled before. The lights of the Embarcadero and midnight Market Street eased by and a half-hour found them headed into the Golden Gate and a choppy sea.

Cork's mind was in a whirl and he found himself wishing for a drink—and then chuckling to himself at the irony of such a wish, when, as the chances were, it was his last. His thoughts drifted onward and he pried his mind for an idea that might provide a channel out of the melee. His chuckle broke out into a rasping laugh and he half turned to Leer.

"Shylock," he bartered crazily, yelling above the drone of the motor and the splash of the wake. "Oi've gawt a proposition fer ye, hif ye'll listen."

Leer eased the throttle halfway back and the roar subsided somewhat. "Nothing funny," he scowled.

"No," Cork grunted earnestly. "Fetch an ear. Davey's dead; them's 'is bones I was whale-blowin' aboot. They're all that's guardin' the blessed hoard. Now, I'd been dead fer sure hif ye 'adn't 'elped me. There's only two of us to divide the bloomin' treasure. 'Alf an' 'alf wi' me—an' Hi'll take you to the blinkin' spot, no questions asked—"

"Well!" Leer scowled. "What the hell you think I've been talking about all night. Let's go; you said the south island—"

"Good then," Cork croaked. "Hi'll take the wheel—"

"You will not!" Leer snarled, smashing Cork back into his seat. His hand flitted to the throttle and the motor answered. Cork sprawled into a corner of the cockpit, struggling to rise, blinded by his effort and with his heart pounding in his temples.

"I gawt thim from a fish!" he shrieked, gaining his feet and plunging headlong onto Leer. "Hits blessed name's *Davey!* Hi gawt thim from a fish, ye blasted maniac! *A fish! A fish—"*

One of Leer's fists left the wheel and shot upward. Cork, muffler torn away and trailing over the bows, felt a stab of pain as the blow struck him on the side of the head. The murky sky upended and his head hit the floorboards of the boat. There was a galaxy of stars, more fireworks—and he was silent.

When Cork opened his eyes again, the pounding beneath the bandages of his head was terrific. His muffler was gone, and the clothes about his chest were disarranged. He was still in the boat—but Leer was nowhere about. Wildly, he struggled to a sitting position, the beat of his heart accentuated by a horrible pain in his side.

Struggling frantically to see through the blear of his eyes, the roar of the motor first penetrated the bandages on his skull—and then, with a pang of nausea, he discerned the form of Leer outlined in the front cockpit beyond the engine hatch. The broker had put him in the rear cockpit, obviously to keep him out of the way.

There was a turmoil of emotions within Cork—and from somewhere, struggling to creep upward and overcome him, a lethargy wormed its ominous way. Cork knew what it was as plainly as he knew that he would never live to step ashore again. How long he had been lying there, chest exposed, dampened by the spray of the prow, he did not know—but he knew that the end had come. And with it, a fury.

A forty-pound brass anchor on the bottom of the cockpit caught his fumbling eye. His numbing fingers slipped to the floor boards of the stern and he felt of them.

"Like the calking on a dory," he muttered to himself. "Flimsy as the bloody mizzen on a junk."

His fingers wrapped themselves about the heavy anchor. Weakly,

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he raised one end of it, chuckling and struggling to keep himself from losing consciousness. But lifting the entire anchor was another thing again—and it was some minutes before he could raise it to the level of his knees.

A moment of steady manipulation brought one of the brass points in direct line with the floor and Cork paused to rest. The strain had doubled the stab in his side and he wondered vaguely whether he would be able to raise the anchor any higher.

And then, with a final superhuman effort, he lunged upward with all his strength and sent the brass point crashing into the flimsy calking of the hull.

There was a splintering crunch and the point buried itself clear to the flange. Briny sea water shot upward in a tiny geyser and bathed Cork's feet.

Leer looked about but did not cut the speed of the boat.

"So you've come to," he shouted above the roar of the motor. "I thought you'd bailed for keeps." He threw a glance toward the dark cliffs ahead. "While you were out, I just thought of something. The south island is only a few acres in area. It wouldn't be hard to find Davey on it. I could do that without your help—" and he burst into laughter.

Cork's eyes fell to the geyser of water at his feet and he joined in the laughter. "Ye're right!" he croaked, grasping hold of the anchor and wrenching it free of the aperture. The sudden inrush, trebled in volume by the momentum of the boat, had already reached a depth of some inches. "Ye'll get the gold"—his eyes flitted to the cliffs ahead and then shoreward—"but it's too blinkin' far fer a sturdy tar to swim," said Cork as he slumped forward and fell across the cowling of the cockpit.

Leer's laughter burst anew—and he was still chuckling when the motor began to sputter and die away. Then his laughter turned to a shriek of terror as the stern of the heavy cutter settled into the troughs.

It was murky and black at ten fathoms. The seaweed wafted this way and that with the currents and only the shells and coral remained inert. Despite the ponderous belt of gold, even Cork moved—though ever so slightly.

And there was a fish somewhere in the picture. One of the species which breathes air and which nudges its young to the surface with its nose that it may breathe.

It was Davey, surly and black and trying—trying to nudge Cork to the surface with her snout and wondering why he would not come to life.

And Davey contented herself with jaunts to the wreck of a galleon on the rocks a short distance away, where she would gorge herself with the small round disks that glittered in the darkness. And back to Cork she would go—and after warding away the carnivore, she would retch golden doubloons over him and then wonder why that, above all things, did not bring him to life again.

THE END.

★ ★ ★

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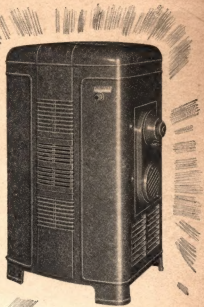

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